



Routledge Critical Sikh Studies

BHAI VIR SINGH (1872–1957)

**RELIGIOUS AND LITERARY MODERNITIES
IN COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL
INDIAN PUNJAB**

Edited by *Anshu Malhotra and Anne Murphy*



Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957)

This volume brings together works by established and emerging scholars to consider the work and impact of Bhai Vir Singh. Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957) was a major force in the shaping of modern Sikh and Punjabi culture, language, and politics in the undivided colonial Punjab, prior to the Partition of the province in 1947, and in the post-colonial state of India. The chapters in this book explore how he both reflected and shaped his time and context and address some of the ongoing legacy of his work in the lives of contemporary Sikhs. The contributors analyze the varied genres, literary, and historical that were adopted and adapted by Bhai Vir Singh to foreground and enhance Sikh religiosity and identity. These include his novels, didactic pamphlets, journalistic writing, prefatory and exegetical work on spiritual and secular historical documents, and his poems and lyrics, among others. This book will be of particular interest to those working in Sikh studies, South Asian studies, and post-colonial studies.

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Figure 0.1 Some of the personal belongings of Bhai Vir Singh including different *ittar* (perfume) bottles, kangha, brush, pens, pencil, keys, personal kirpan, a plate, and other items

Photo credit: In the collection of Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi



Figure 0.2 Bhai Vir Singh's desk

Photo credit: Tejinder Singh Bawa, Bhai Vir Singh Niwas Asthan, Amritsar.



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1 Introduction

Bhai Vir Singh as an Author, Scholar, and Reformist

Anshu Malhotra and Anne Murphy

For many Punjabis in India, as well as scholars of Punjab, the name Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957; hereafter, BVS) is synonymous with modern Punjabi literary production and Sikh religious reform.¹ BVS was a major force in shaping Sikh and Punjabi culture, language, and politics in the undivided Punjab, prior to the partition of the province in 1947, and his influence endured in the postcolonial period. He was a prominent exegete and scholar of Sikh scriptures and literatures, and inaugurated new genres, modes of production, and themes in Punjabi periodical and literary production. He played a central role in shaping the contours of modern Sikh identity and self-representation, and in that sense his religious, literary, and heuristic work can be seen to represent a major contribution to an on-going epistemological turn at the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. His intellectual labor and literary and scholarly production thus had a far-reaching impact, making legible what modern Sikhism might be to his varied interlocutors in an evolving Punjabi and Sikh public.

This volume presents chapters that explore the diverse work undertaken by BVS in the literary field, as a scholar, author, and journalist, and the contexts in which he developed and honed his ideas, bringing together new, sophisticated, and insightful scholarship on this important figure.² Reexamination of his work and complex legacies is necessary, given the now dated nature of much earlier work. Some of the earliest work on BVS fit him into ‘western’ categories and broad rubrics of history and representation in order to make his work legible to Western audiences and enable him to inhabit a coveted Western modernity. Thus, Ganda Singh (1972) referred to BVS as an initiator of ‘Sikh renaissance,’ and Harbans Singh (1972) represented varied Sikh movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as imitative of Western forms: he spoke of the Nirankari movement as Puritanism, Namdhari as militant Protestantism, the Singh Sabha as revivalism and renaissance, and the Panch Khalsa Diwan as aggressive fundamentalism. Such designations ignored the specificity of Indian colonial formations, in terms of both emerging affiliative politics and the economic, social, and cultural conditions that provoked particular responses. Other

early work was largely hagiographical or semi-hagiographical in nature and was uncritically appreciative of his ‘great’ contribution to the Sikh cause, i.e., a perceived necessity to endorse its separatist valence. Additionally, many scholars felt compelled to dwell on his persona as part of their analytic to understand his personage and influence. Thus, Harbans Singh at various points draws attention to Vir Singh’s own mystical experience even as he speaks of the mysticism apparent in his oeuvre, for example, within the epic poem *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* (Singh 1972, 53). Similarly, in his foreword to Singh’s book, J.S. Neki emphasizes Vir Singh’s nature as that of a ‘spiritual and elevated soul’ (Singh 1972); and Satinder Singh in his evaluation of Vir Singh’s life and creative work (*jīvan te racnā*) writes, ‘the inspiration for Bhai Vir Singh’s entire literary creation was his religious (*dhārmak*) bent’ (Singh 1982, 145).

Others have been less laudatory in their assessments: Sant Singh Sekhon called Vir Singh’s 1905 poetic work, *Raṇa Surat Singh*, ‘largely modern in form’ but ‘oriental’ and ‘premodern’ in spirit, with its ‘stress on otherworldliness’ (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 124); in the same volume, it is noted that Vir Singh’s devotion to Sikh thought and religious philosophy ‘submerged the thinker in him, and bound him down to what he inherited in the Sikh tradition’ (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 110). At the same time, the authors praised him for his contribution to literary modernism in Punjabi (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 109). Overall, therefore, scholarly accounting of BVS and his work as a modern writer and publisher has been contradictory. In this way, as Anne Murphy (2012b, 133) has observed, he has been treated much like Bharatendu Harishchandra of Banaras, a prominent Hindi-language author commonly regarded as both a founding father of modern Hindi literature and a defining voice in the framing of Hindu interests in the first half of the nineteenth century. While BVS is generally seen to inaugurate and define modern Punjabi literature, particularly in literary terms, he is, like Harishchandra, also perceived to be ‘traditionalist’ because of his religious commitments (Dalmia 1999, 49). Comparison may also be made with the prominent Bengali litterateur, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, who was viewed as a secular-rationalist in his early career, before becoming an advocate for Hindu cultural nationalism in his later oeuvre (Sarkar 2001), as, for example, in his famous novel *Anandmath* (1882) (for a discussion of this comparison and the ‘call to the past’ that shaped both BVS and Bankim Chandra, see Murphy 2012b, 135). The play between secular-liberal stances and a compelling need to endorse a culturally driven communitarian position was commonplace in the period.

The chapters in this volume take on the task of explicating how we should approach this complex figure, brought together for publication in the 150th year of his birth, in 2022. In this Introduction, we begin with a general sense of Vir Singh’s life and work, and then draw out several themes that emerge in his work as a whole, and which can be seen operating in complex ways across the chapters in the volume: the dynamic print culture

in the Punjabi language in the colonial period and BVS's formative role in building it, as well as his particular use of the serial publication form; his engagement with the representation of the past and alongside that, the complexity of his historical work in diverse genres, creative, exegetical, and scholarly; the role of gender in his work in relation to his communitarian commitments; and the specter of conversion, and its varied dimensions in his work.

A Punjabi intellectual

Vir Singh's scholarly and literary commitments can be seen to follow from his family history, although he also brought innovation to his role. He was born in Amritsar in a family of scholars. His grandfather, Kahn Singh, learned in Sanskrit and Braj, was a hakim or *unānī* medical practitioner, and was the one to move from their ancestral place in Garh Maharaj to Amritsar. His father, an Ayurvedic medical practitioner, Dr. Charan Singh, was also a scholar who translated Kalidasa's famous *Shakuntalā* from Sanskrit into Punjabi. His maternal grandfather, Bhai Hazara Singh, was a scholar of Sanskrit and Persian, who translated many Urdu and Farsi works into Punjabi. He also penned the *Gurū Granth Kosh*, a dictionary for the Guru Granth Sahib, in which endeavor BVS assisted him, and wrote a commentary on the work of Bhai Gurdas. Hazara Singh's collaboration with colonial scholars like M.A. Macauliffe is well known (G. Singh 1972; S. Singh 1982).

As an inheritor of North Indian cosmopolitan linguistic affinities, BVS was trained in Persian, Sanskrit, and Braj, and was versed in the regional Landa script, used in mercantile contexts, appropriate for his Arora caste status. He was trained in languages and arithmetic by a local *pandhā* and a Mullah. His formal schooling in Amritsar's Church Mission School, where he performed very well, lasted through class 10 and came to an end after he took the Entrance exam in 1891 (S. Singh 1982, 12; G. Singh 1991). Vir Singh's subsequent choice of Punjabi as a vehicle for his writings and for development as a language of print, besides his family's influence, was also shaped by the emerging identity politics of colonial Punjab. The Punjabi nationalist and Arya Samaji leader Lala Lajpat Rai, for example, trained himself to write and speak in Hindi in order to adhere to the Arya Samaj's language politics, even though, to begin with, he was more proficient in Urdu and Persian (Rai n.d., Malhotra Forthcoming 2023). The Punjabi language, of course, had a wider connect to Punjabi peoples, as Farina Mir's (2010) work on colonial period Punjabi print culture, discussed below, has shown. The Punjabi language press, which printed mainly in the Gurmukhi and Urdu/modified-Perso-Arabic (known today as 'Shahmukhi') scripts, and to a lesser extent Devanagari, flourished in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Punjab. The suturing of modern Punjabi in Gurmukhi to Sikh identity was strongly tied to Singh Sabha politics of the period, and

in this domain, BVS holds a prominent place. BVS can thus be said to have shaped the formations of modern Sikh theology and political culture but also the modern formation of the Punjabi language in India itself (Shackle 1988). He dedicated his intellectual life to promoting Punjabi as a language of literature and as a modern language of print, lending it a particular form and envisaging it as an emotive symbol of Sikh identity.

Vir Singh was sympathetic to the reformist project of the Lahore Singh Sabha, determined to create a 'pure' Khalsa identity among Sikhs. From a young age, BVS recognized the significance of press and publication in carrying forward a vast array of messages that he wished to convey to a 'Sikh public' (see discussion below). In 1891, he jointly with Wazir Singh set up the *Wazir-i-Hind Press* in Amritsar, for which he penned many a reformist tract through the vehicle of the *Khalsa Tract Society*, founded in 1894; in 1899, he began the newspaper *Khālāsā Samāchar* (explored in this volume in the chapter by Parneet K. Dhillon and Jaspal K. Dhanju) in support of the same cause. Publication of the journal *Nirgunīārā* started in 1893. Though BVS's literary activity was focused on defining Sikhism and its adherents, he also participated in larger Punjabi intercommunity projects. He successfully ran the business of a printing press, with a wide range of (non-Sikh) popular publications, as Arti Minocha notes in her chapter, and was successful in keeping it commercially viable. Later, BVS was also a founding director of the Punjab and Sindh Bank, established in 1908. His literary and social activity continued after independence/Partition, and in 1949 the East Punjab University gave him the degree of 'Doctor of Oriental Learning.' BVS was a nominated member of the Punjab Legislative Council in 1952 and a nominated member of the National Academy of Letters in 1954. In 1953, he was awarded by the Sahitya Academy for his poetry collection *Mere Sāīān Jīo*. The Government of India honored him with the *Padma Bhūshaṇ* award in 1956 (G. Singh 1972; S. Singh 1982).

Before continuing to consider the role of Punjabi print culture and BVS's work within it, we may comment on two noteworthy aspects of his life. BVS was not involved in any direct political activity in the Punjabi public sphere. Given that he lived through some of the most dramatic and traumatic moments of Punjabi and Sikh history in the twentieth century – whether the Rowlatt Satyagraha followed by the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in his native Amritsar in 1919, the Gurdwara Reform movement in the 1920s and the emergence of Akali politics, the nationalist movement in India and Punjab, or the searing Partition of Punjab in 1947 – BVS managed to remain aloof from it all and immersed in his creative writerly work. This is striking, for a figure who on a cultural level was so deeply invested in contemporary issues and the task of Sikh representation. The second aspect to consider is the recognition bestowed on him by the postcolonial Indian government for his literary contribution to Punjabi language. At least partly, this can be seen as a tribute to his tireless promotion of Punjabi, associated with and promoted by the postcolonial Indian Punjab,

which later became a Sikh-majority state, though not in his lifetime. The state reorganization undertaken by the Indian government in the 1960s based on the idea of a congruence of territory and the regional vernacular in many ways represents the triumph of the new language and print politics consciously inaugurated in the second half of the nineteenth century by people like BVS. That print culture, therefore, is crucial to understanding BVS, his work, and his legacy.

Punjabi print publics and language politics

In his influential work, Habermas discussed the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century Europe as an intersubjective and communicative one, where private individuals shed their inherited status and came together as a public body, to form public opinion and to critique the state (Habermas 2006). It was a forum for deliberative processes for democratic construction of society, societal integration, with an emancipatory potential (Calhoun 1992; Susen 2011). Though Habermas's public sphere is considered an ideal rather than a reality even in the European context, the emergent colonial public sphere in India and Punjab did not develop full democratic, emancipatory, and integrative potential in the nineteenth century, given the imperatives of colonial governmentality that inaugurated competitive communitarian and caste politics. Scholars studying the operation of colonial power and its instruments have stressed that the Indian upper-caste middle-class men involved in the many 'reform' projects were dependent on the colonial state's incorporative structures, such as the lower rungs of bureaucracy and state patronage, for survival. When inclusive nationalism emerged, it remained constrained by parallel sectarian and caste politics, commandeered by upper-caste male elites.

The nineteenth century in colonial India was instead marked by the emergence of diverse print publics, in the context of the growth of what Anderson (1983) has called 'print capitalism,' where horizontal linkages grew among caste and community alliances, and emerging print technologies were deployed to reach desired audiences. Sikh associational politics as seen in the activities of the Singh Sabha and the Chief Khalsa Diwan, alongside the polemical interventions of the Arya Samaj, and those of the many educational and social Anjumans (voluntary societies) that proliferated in the middle to late nineteenth century, meant rapid growth of periodical, pamphlet, and newspaper production in this period in Punjab (Jones 1989; Oberoi 1994; Van der Linden 2008; Fuchs 2019). Much of this material was configured around communitarian definition and reform, and contributed to greater differentiation between and within religions. It would be a mistake to see all activity of this time as agonistic in tone and content, however. As the path-breaking work of Mir (2010) has shown, Punjabi print publics, which Mir calls the 'Punjabi literary formation,' flourished in this period in diverse terms: Mir demonstrates this through exploration of

the popularity and consumption of certain literary forms, like *qisse*, which were written and enjoyed by Punjabis of diverse religious communities and across the different scripts Punjabi was written in. We therefore see that both impulses, divisive and inclusive, emerged simultaneously (Murphy 2018, 72).

Outreach to ‘imagined’ faith-based and other ascriptive communities coalesced into opinion-wielding publics both in new ways, linked to new technologies of communication and interactions with globally configured print publics, and in ways that emerged out of or through existing literary and devotional networks. As the growing body of work on Indian early modernity has demonstrated, the development of literary, devotional, and faith-based publics was also linked to the deepening connections and networks that emerged among older literary and commercial routes in this period (Subrahmanyam 1997, 1998). A society in motion, whether of religious and ritual specialists, men armed with philosophical knowledge, sectarian practices, and weapons aligned with varied sects, scribal elites carrying their skills, or soldiers on the move selling their prowess created vibrant, mobile, and interested publics in eighteenth-century India (Pinch 2006; Dhavan 2011; O’Hanlon and Washbrook 2014; Williams et al 2018; Murphy Forthcoming). This was a polyglot society, where elites in particular easily comprehended and juggled cosmopolitan languages like Persian and Sanskrit, with growing employment of *bhākhā* or emergent vernaculars, such as Braj, which functioned as an elite, transregional literary idiom (Phukan 2001; Busch 2011; Orsini 2011), alongside more local vernaculars like Punjabi, in dynamic exchange with Braj and other vernacular forms (Malhotra 2017; Murphy 2019; Vig 2020). Certainly, Vir Singh, from a prominent scribal and intellectual family of Amritsar, as has been discussed, inherited such a literary and cultural tradition; Jvala Singh’s chapter in this volume shows this in some detail. The shedding of this diverse linguistic repertoire, by exclusively adopting Punjabi as a language of the Sikhs (already indexed in the inclinations of BVS’s father Charan Singh), and in print in Gurmukhi script – which was linked to Sikh cultural production, though it was also used for a broad range of material across the religious spectrum in both manuscript and print culture (Murphy 2022) – can be attributed to a large extent to BVS, though others like Ditt Singh, also a prolific writer, participated in this endeavor (Malhotra 2017, Ch. 6) and, as has been noted, there was already a move toward Punjabi as a vehicle of cultural expression in the literary activity of his family. Vir Singh went further in assigning different languages to separate communities, as Anshu Malhotra’s chapter in this volume indicates. The multilingual inheritance of BVS, which facilitated his scholarly work on historical materials in late nineteenth century, discussed below, was then not bequeathed to coming generations. However, the investment in Punjabi fired the flourishing of this language in its fresh modern avatar, refining its narratological and grammatical shape for deployment in different genres.

An aspect of BVS's enthusiasm for constructing a modern Sikh persona is visible through the multiple genres he worked in, from tract, the newspaper, to creative work. BVS's dexterity in switching codes, and being seriously engaged with multiple genres simultaneously, is an index of his commitment to undertaking the complex and multifaceted labor within the Punjabi print culture that he helped bring into being. Foremost among the 'modern' genres and forms he worked in is the tract literature he participated in producing, publishing, and distributing on a broad scale. This work sought to shape understanding and experience of modern Sikh identity, with a focus on women, and simple story-lines acted as a pretext for restructuring social lives in an emerging middle-class (Malhotra 2002, 2005; see below). Similar material was produced in the *Khalsa Samachar*, which the chapter in this volume by Dhillon and Dhanju explores in detail. Also of enduring importance were the historical novels for which he is well known: *Sundari* (1898), *Bijay Singh* (1899), *Satwant Kaur* (1900, 1927), and *Bābā Naudh Singh* (1907, 1921), which were – like many fictional works of the period in Urdu and other languages – first published in a serialized form, linking his fictional and journalistic output. Indeed, as Murphy as well as Dhillon and Dhanju discuss in their contributions to this volume, Vir Singh's work was overwhelmingly first published within the periodicals he founded and worked with, linking the dynamic and inexpensive Punjabi print world of his making to transformative changes in the shape of Punjabi literary and scholarly production.

Sundari in particular has often been hailed as the 'first modern Punjabi novel,' although its genre affiliations are complex, with oral and performative features and ties to historiography imbedded within it (Murphy 2012b; Malhotra present volume). Such complex legacies and influences are typical of early fictional work in South Asia; Meenakshi Mukherjee (2006, 596) has written of the 'plural heritage' of the novel, and in Jennifer Dubrow's (2016, 290–1) more recent description, 'the Indian novel was not only reinterpreted on the ground, but also itself emerged from the ways that late nineteenth-century writers overlaid indigenous literary traditions with their own reinterpretations of the genre' (see also Orsini 2009, 163 ff.). Arti Minocha's chapter directly addresses this dynamic, arguing that the Punjabi public 'ecumene' was not merely imitative or derivative of Western public forms but had its own specificities and hybrid cultural practices that allowed for the construction of new subjectivities and the burgeoning of new modes of agency. Historical and poetic works, like that which came to be known as the 'novel,' were also first published in serial periodicals, as Murphy discusses in her chapter. That Vir Singh's diverse work across genres was so directly linked to his work in Punjab's burgeoning ephemeral and periodical print culture is testimony to the importance of this domain in shaping Punjabi language intellectual life. The versatility of this work in terms of genre and content reflected BVS's commitment to Sikh identity-making; this urgent task could only be completed through multiple

genres/approaches, which each allowed for different kinds of things to be said and different kinds of audiences to be reached.

Vir Singh can be said to have participated in Punjabi print culture to an unprecedented degree and with marked success. In this sense, BVS was not only alert to the possibilities of 'print capitalism' but was ready to both mobilize and shape the imaginative and aesthetic potentialities of this new medium of expression. But BVS's contribution to the construction of modern Sikh identity took other forms as well. We next turn to see it in both his historicist and exegetical works.

Histories and modernities

Vir Singh's work is marked by a particular orientation to the past. This places his oeuvre firmly within a modernist phenomenology. The tension highlighted by earlier scholars between the 'modern' and 'traditional' in BVS, however, has not provided a lens of lasting value for understanding his work. BVS's Sikhism was very much modern, as Mandair (2005, 2009) has shown and discusses further in this volume, and his vision of the Sikh past was no less so (Murphy 2012b, Ch. 4). At the same time, his work was grounded in pre-existing forms of knowledge production, as evidenced in his biography.

Scholars of South Asia who discuss early modernity, between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, speak of multiple phenomena that increasingly 'connected' a mobile world, whether these be the growth of global capitalism, new technologies, increasing trade and commerce, or growing populations in powerful states. At the same time, we can see locally configured impulses within various societies that account for simultaneous experience of these changes, decentering and 'provincializing Europe' (Subrahmanyam 1997; Chakrabarty 2000). Given the landmark historiographical interventions of the early modernists, who have described the complex ways in which South Asian cultural, social, and political forms bore many of the markers of 'the modern,' it is important to unsettle the assumed link between colonialism and the 'arrival' of modernity in the global south. It may be more apposite to speak of multiple modernities and locate some in autochthonous forms (Conrad 2017, 57–61).

Farina Mir's exploration here of the nature of literary modernity vis-à-vis BVS's work is allied with such a perspective. While BVS is traditionally understood as inaugurating the moment of modernity in Punjabi literature, particularly with his novel *Sundari*, Mir underscores that this notion relies upon a linear and progressive history of Punjabi literature, culminating in a modernist moment that coincided with colonialism, when a certain self-conscious subjectivity is achieved in literary terms. Mir challenges such assumptions and argues for a change in sensibility among Punjabi litterateurs earlier, from within the tradition, where newer protocols of self-referencing emerged from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries.

Punjabi composers of *qisse* self-reflexively moved from their location within a larger Perso-Arabic world to a Punjabi region-specific genealogy. She thus makes a case for an internal, regional, and ‘lumpy’ beginning of modernity, rejecting its reduction to colonial origins or to the genius of one author, even one as prolific as BVS.

At the same time, however, colonial social interventions and governmental social and bureaucratic projects, including the multiple inquiries to ‘know’ the people, also energized the desire to know the self among the colonized, from a lens refracted through the colonizer’s gaze, and to mold the self to belong to a new spatial-temporal ‘modernist’ imaginary. We see this, for example, in Vir Singh’s text-critical work, discussed in the next section, whereby he produced printed editions of earlier texts: he was in dialogue with the British critics like Macauliffe, who were dismissive of both the so-called ‘Hindu’ topoi in which ‘Sikh’ literature was encased, as also their apparently lack of historical sense; some of his rewriting of the past in communitarian terms responded to such criticism. While ‘modernity’ is of course a notoriously slippery concept to define – and it is not our intent to do so here – some of its common hallmarks are useful to consider, insofar as they can signal some of the issues that emerge in the analyses of BVS’s work across the chapters in this volume. One such hallmark relates to a certain kind of reflexive awareness of a separation from the past and a heightened sense of experiencing historical change (moves that are often linked to new political formations like the nation-state) (Chakrabarty 2011). We see a preoccupation with the representation of the past in Vir Singh’s work, as Murphy (2012b, Ch. 4) has argued, indicating a new kind of engagement with the past, albeit one that drew on existing forms of representation of the past, such as in the *gurbilās* literature (Murphy 2012b, Ch. 3; Vig 2020). In BVS’s case, his novels cultivated an imaginative space for the playing out of history – history as a past that feeds the present – and the historical consciousness his novels deployed drew in complex ways on Sikh precedents, now in a colonial frame (Murphy 2012b). Through his novels, he blurred the line between historical fact and creative fiction to find a springboard for a desired Sikh future.

The configuration of the past in the work of BVS is a recurring theme in these chapters. Julie Vig in her chapter discusses questions of intertextuality, context, and content in BVS’s historical and biographical *Sri Kalgidhar Chamatkār* (1925) through an analysis of distinct representations of an event portrayed within it and three other texts written at different times. Linking the *Chamatkar* to the *Gurbilās* literature, Vig concentrates on how the Battle of Bhangani (1688) [when Guru Gobind Singh resided within the districts of the hill chiefs Fateh Shah of Garhwal and Bhim Chand of Kahlur] came to be inscribed in the *Bachittar Nāṭak*, attributed to the tenth Guru himself, the *Gursobhā* of Sainapati (1708), Koer Singh’s *Gurbilās Patshāhi Das* of the late eighteenth century, and in BVS’s *Chamatkar*. The pre-battle context moves from questions of hunting and royal privilege in

the first two texts, to that of marriage and familial honor in the third, to BVS's emphasis on war strategies, and the treachery of 500 *Paṭhāns*, the Mughal king Aurangzeb, and the hill chiefs. Vig shows how, in his desire to present an ideal Sikh past populated by model Sikhs, BVS took it upon himself to tell a particular story of the Guru. While there is therefore some significant difference between his rendering and earlier texts, BVS's version is often interspersed with quotations from those texts, used judiciously to lend authority to his own version. As has been noted, this is a practice one sees in his fictional work as well. Vig describes a 'chain of receptions' that is created in the *Chamatkar* through the intertextuality of the event. In this way, we see the interplay of different texts and how these are then reordered in BVS's configuration of the past.

Jvala Singh, whose insightful chapter addresses Vir Singh's multi-year project on the *Sūraj Granth*, also highlights BVS's approach to the past, which is linked in formative terms to Vir Singh's exegetical and scholarly work, discussed below. Singh shows that BVS's innovation included a lengthy introduction, laying the ground for explicating history, its methods, and why Santokh Singh passed the test of 'scientific' history, but also exceeded it, through his literary and spiritual interventions. Minocha too comments on the Introduction that BVS wrote to his massive editorial work of Santokh Singh's *Suraj Granth*, to understand BVS's concept of 'history,' and the hermeneutics that opened up when he purposefully engaged it. While BVS was in dialogue with the idea of history as developed in Europe, his philosophy of history was not entirely empiricist, nor did he set to create an opposition between history and mythology. Minocha argues that, for BVS, the 'truths' history was meant to expound and discover included elaborating the anecdotal, the popular, spiritual, miraculous, and the mythological; her approach aligns with prior work on historical representation in South Asia that has explored its multivalent 'textures' (Rao et al 2008). In this way, Indian histories and modes of representation can 'provincialize Europe' (Chakrabarty 2000).

At the same time that we see history as a particular preoccupation of BVS's oeuvre, it was not the only one. Murphy's chapter highlights the distinctive temporal orientation of Vir Singh's poetry, other than his long poem *Rana Surat Singh*, in a modernist form of the lyric. He published multiple volumes of poetry that drew together poems published previously in his periodicals; these poems are strikingly presentist in their orientation, challenging the preoccupation with the past that marked his other work. Perhaps for this reason, Murphy argues, these poetic works move beyond utilitarian and strictly identitarian formulations, demanding that we take seriously the full range and complexity of BVS's work.

The question of what constitutes history/ies, and ensuing relationships to modernity/ies, comes up repeatedly in the chapters of this volume. That is because 'history does not just refer to events and processes out there, but that it exists as a negotiated resource at the core of shifting configurations

of the social worlds' (Banerjee-Dube and Dube 2009, 9). The meaning, authority, and power derived from engaging with this resource were important in the shaping of public debates in colonial Punjab. The past could be invoked, accessed, used, discarded, excised, appropriated, and more, in order to shape the present, make it meaningful, mold lives here and now. Further, as Chakrabarty (2015) has shown, the interleaving and inter-animation of 'cloistered histories' (with its Western academy-based credentials) and 'popular histories' (imaginary, mythological, insistent) at the genesis of the emergence of disciplinary history in India are visible in the myriad forms through which BVS engaged with the past. BVS's discursive politics of history worked in the interests of constructing a 'Sikh' community. While the idea of community invokes primordiality and is often seen as opposed to modernity, in the context of colonial Punjab, it was the compulsions of engaging with specific features of colonial governmentality that compelled the move toward more fixed notions of community, reflecting the broader tensions in colonial governance that foregrounded communitarian social organization in nascent representational forms. However, fixing the unruly and the fluid was neither an easy task nor a necessarily successful one. BVS himself, a prime advocate of the boundedness of communities – which would be unambiguous in the interests they shared and symbols they exhibited – floundered in actually achieving it. The impermeability that he at least intellectually hoped to achieve was not always possible, not even in his work, which on the surface belabored that point, as some of our chapters demonstrate and Murphy (2012b) earlier showed in her analysis of the formulation of the *prajā* or 'people' as a social category that surpassed religious identity in *Sundari*. However, he did centrally and increasingly over time work toward that end, in his body of text-critical and exegetical work, to which we now turn.

The work of the scholar: text-critical and exegetical work

Among the most laborious undertakings of BVS's long career was the energy expended on his work as a historian and an exegete. Through this work, he hoped to reorient Sikh publics into self-conscious self-presentation as Sikhs, severing ties, to the extent possible, with a wider shared ecumene, where plural cultural legacies traditionally had not created either confusion or discomfort with regard to identity and the overlapping cultural practices had proliferated in social life. Through this work, he effectively created the Sikh historical canon, including among them Rattan Singh Bhangu's *Prāchīn Pañth Prakāśh*, as foundational works with a historicist basis of Sikh identity-making in the early decades of the twentieth century. As Murphy notes in her chapter, this scholarly activity persisted over the course of Vir Singh's life, continuing alongside his poetic and tract work, while he retreated from writing in other genres with which he made a mark, such as the novel and play. We can see this work as fundamentally

tied to his historicist interests, discussed above, as expressed in his novels and play, which are located in a historical past that is used as a resource for the present. In this way, they can be seen to be tied to an identitarian project. In his scholarly and hermeneutic work of representing and organizing Sikh pasts to fulfill presentist needs and his fictional labors where he often collapsed different story-telling modes (including history), BVS simultaneously indulged in writing the ‘cloistered histories,’ described above, as he rendered their popular versions. As he did this, as Murphy (2012b) has shown, BVS’s historical interests reflected the broader dynamics of history writing in colonial India at the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

At the same time, the historical interests and practices expressed in Vir Singh’s exegetical and text-critical work draw also on Vir Singh’s intellectual and familial inheritance, representing strong continuity with pre-colonial forms of intellectual production and scholarly conceits. This represents one of the important points of both continuity and rupture in the work of BVS; as such, such work cannot be dismissed as simply modernist and derivative of Western scholarly norms. A number of chapters in this volume give attention to Vir Singh’s abiding commitment to text-critical and exegetical work, each approached from a different perspective; together, they underscore the ambition of BVS’s efforts and the complexity of both the innovations and continuities that constituted the work. Vig’s chapter, introduced above, describes BVS’s reworking of the modernist-biography of Sikh Gurus, including *Srī Gurū Nānak Chamatkār*, *Srī Kalgīdhār Chamatkār*, and *Srī Asht Gurū Chamatkār*, which we can include in this domain of activity for their reliance on historical texts, and his integration of these texts as sources into his modernist rendering of the past. As Vig describes so well, BVS used this new form, drawing on existing historical and hagiographical representations, to describe sacred lives in an accessible language and to re-present a range of texts to Sikh audiences in the same vein. Vig’s chapter studies the manner in which the tenth Guru was re-imagined and how BVS re-inscribed importance to certain episodes in his life different from but intersecting with earlier texts.

Other work in this volume along these lines addresses writing that engages with texts in different modes: as exegesis and as historical document – that is, not by reworking older texts into a new ‘modern’ form but working with the texts themselves and their interpretation, through scholarly apparatuses. This too can be seen to express a singularly modern sensibility, reflecting modernist privileging of originary texts; this had a clear colonial genealogy in the South Asian context, as scholars such as Lata Mani (1990) have shown. At the same time, such work draws upon a long-standing tradition of exegesis and commentary – as Jvala Singh shows, it drew upon existing traditions of oral discourse as *kathā* on the *Suraj Granth* and other texts, as well as literate interactions with said texts, what has been coined as an ‘oral-literate’ intersectional ambience of

texts (Orsini and Butler-Schofield 2015). This was then integrated with a didactic impulse to convey meaningful and appropriate messages through the print medium in the reformist culture of the time.

The chapters by Jvala Singh and Harjeet Grewal in this collection highlight the importance of text-critical work and its relationship to Vir Singh's oeuvre as a whole. In addition to its contributions, noted above, the chapter by Jvala Singh lays out the varied impulses behind Vir Singh's monumental, decadal effort in the editing, reorganizing, and 'transcreating' Santokh Singh's *Gur Pratāp Sūraj Granth*, when he had it printed and published in 14 volumes in 1927. As has been discussed, this project reflected BVS's multilingual and intellectually vibrant Sikh inheritance, as well as new reformist thinking and a privileging of Punjabi. Here as elsewhere, we see the complex interplay in Vir Singh's work of inheritance and innovation. Mention has been made of BVS's configuration of history in relation to Santokh Singh's text. The explicatory footnotes further clarified for the reader how the text is to be approached and apprehended. Importantly, through introducing new grammatical and orthographic rules, including the discarding of the *larīwar* tradition of *scriptio continua*, by introducing word breaks, a new reading experience was constructed. Singh argues that the massive publishing task acted as a form of advocacy for the text and its author, lest the readers nurtured on reformist rhetoric not understand its immense value. This demonstrates, too, the ways in which the processes and dynamics described here were contingent and incomplete at this time. In parts of colonial Punjab, a sharp bifurcation between Hindu/Sikh was still an on-going process and common practices still flourished; and the territorial, along with religious reshaping of post-Partition Punjab, may be said to have contributed enormously to what ideologues like BVS had set in motion.

Reading itself, then, was a locus for reform and self-conscious cultivation in this period, linked to the emerging idea of a reading public that has been discussed. Singh shows this: that BVS can be said to have intervened in the shaping of audience expectations and the reception of the *Suraj Granth*; he hoped to tell the public how to read it and what to make of it. The chapter by Harjeet Grewal delves deeply into this terrain, discussing how the *Purātan Janamsākhī* was being reframed for private reading, focusing, as it were, on the changing *mentalité* of the time. Focusing on BVS's textual-historical work, Grewal describes how the efforts of BVS and other Singh Sabha stalwarts, as well as colonial bureaucrat-scholars, led the *Puratan Janamsakhi* to be presented as the *ur-text* that detailed the 'biographical' narrative of Nanak's life (1926). Several aspects of this process reveal how Western historical and scholarly patterns began to impinge on the selective way *Janamsakhi* materials came to be fashioned, such as through an obsession with origins of texts and lives, the narratological framework in which these could be presented, and the incorporation of the linear life-pattern as against, if not cyclical, then at least the embedded multiple narrative

voices which were now excised and rationalized (the disapprobation of the voice of Nanak companion Bala, for example). The process of excision, selection, elision, grammatological intervention, and paratextual commentary, Grewal shows, not only guided the now silent reader engaged with the text to apprehend it in particular ways but also contributed to the making of a specific Sikh identity under the aegis and patronage of the colonial state and the modern identity politics it unleashed. The ‘historicist mode of event-based narrative’ that became the *Janamsakhi* also meant that the world of orality and performance was suppressed in the ‘autodialogic’ mode opened by new reading practices between the ideal Sikh reader (whether in Punjab or the diaspora) and his/her *Puratan* text, for Grewal. The world of polyphony, or multivocality, did not disappear, as we have been noting in this Introduction and as some of our chapters here underscore; however, for Grewal, it was at this time that the notion of an ideal text, alongside that of an ideal reader, came to be constructed.

Mandair’s chapter in this volume contributes to this explication of Vir Singh’s scholarly life in important ways, to understand his role in ‘reconfiguring the Sikh understanding of *gurmat* (or central teaching of the Sikh Gurus) in alignment with modern Western thought, which he achieved by ontologically reconstituting (or systematizing) of the concept of God.’ The domain of ‘theology’ was thus determined within a colonial frame: Vir Singh’s contribution here was to develop a coherent ‘Sikh theology’ that could adhere to Western expectations, while preserving a Sikh identity in the face of the interpretation offered by Ernest Trumpp, which effaced a Sikh positionality. Vir Singh’s scholarship thus moved both within and at times outside of Western expectations and rubrics, as several chapters show. The rich repertoire of Sikh textuality in historical and theological terms was in Vir Singh’s hands nimbly constructed to draw the contours of a modern Sikhism, apparently already available in the resourceful textualized past. However, when it came to the gendered representation of this pristine past, Vir Singh came to an impasse – there was little historical material to utilize, though it wasn’t completely absent – and he turned primarily to fiction to plug the gap, maneuvering to confound the difference between historical fact and fiction, to give ballast to his historically conscious sensibility.

The problem of gender

Many of BVS’s novels can be considered ‘historical fiction’ and are situated in an imaginary past. What is also a concern of these novels and the many tracts he wrote was the question of restructuring gender roles, and ‘reforming’ women, ‘converting’ them to some manner of an ‘authentic’ religious-cultural persona that their present state belied. Women, in Vir Singh’s imaginative work, were ostensibly empowered through adopting restructured religiosity and redevised rituals. However, it needs to be

underscored, as many feminist scholars working on the nineteenth century have done, that such reform entailed abandoning an autonomous popular cultural sphere and succumbing to the new patriarchal domesticity and its multifarious demands. BVS portrayed women as instrumental to the achievement of an 'authentic' religious identity and worked alongside reformers elsewhere in India who sought to reorganize women's domestic roles to fashion multiple middle-class agendas and to lay a new stress on confining women to remodeled ideal homes (Malhotra 2005). Further, as Christine Fair notes, the religious authenticity of the fictional women of the past in BVS's novels came with disparaging the contemporary women who needed to be reformed (Fair 2010). Vir Singh's writing on women also had an added imperative: to block the fluidity and porosity between Hindu and Sikh women's identities, to prevent the program of culling a separate Sikh identity from coming undone. In this context, he often portrayed the agency of women as vital to the cause of the reformed Sikh; this was construed in both negative terms, such as through the figure of the 'unreformed woman' who encouraged Sikh ambivalence toward religious identity and more positive ones, defining the 'reformed' Sikh woman's role in bringing her men to the call of community (N.G.K. Singh 1993, Ch. 7; Malhotra 2002). In this way, BVS was typical of his time: as Malhotra (2002) has shown, the tract literature of this period, with many of the KTS tracts written by BVS, was highly regulatory in its approach to women, setting up almost-impossible ideals and then chastising women for not fulfilling them. As Dhillon and Dhanju show in their chapter, the *Khalsa Samachar* functioned along similar lines, such that 'new roles and possibilities were made open to women... [at the same time] that these new roles were... configured within both existing and novel forms of patriarchal control.'

Gurpreet Bal (2006, 3533) has thus called Vir Singh's first novel *Sundari* (1898) 'the culmination, objectification, and justification' of reformist Singh Sabha identity formation, reflecting its commitment to reformist ideals and the identification of appropriate Sikh practices. BVS's other novels, *Bijay Singh* (1899) and *Satwant Kaur* (in two parts 1900 and 1927), further carried these themes forward, attempting to outline ideal behavior for Sikh women, often for women who became Sikhs only recently through a process of conversion. His novels went on to cater to the needs of the diasporic Sikh community in places like America, Canada, Singapore and elsewhere, who utilized the novels' moral lessons to shape and protect Sikh identities in these places, as Christine Fair (2010) has shown. So successful was BVS in his venture of writing historical fiction to build Tat Khalsa Sikh identity, that by 1972, his novel *Sundari* had gone through 42 editions totaling more than a million copies (H. Singh 1972).

Two chapters in this volume discuss the varied aspects of the novel *Sundari*, underscoring how the novel continues to be read, even as it continues to impact diverse audiences in India and the diaspora. Malhotra contributes a detailed reading of the novel, exploring its form, and the

circularity of the text, in the myriad, and sometimes contradictory, messages it conveyed. Despite pushing for a separate Sikh identity for men and women that the novel overtly attempts, the result is in fact far more ambivalent than it seems at the surface. Sikhs must become distinct from Hindus, the novel suggests, but the Sikhs are also portrayed as being related to and similar to Hindus (see also Murphy 2012b, Ch. 4). Likewise, women are indicted in the novel as the cause of ersatz *Sikhī*, indeed for its present state of degeneration, but they are also portrayed as Sikhi's hope, capable of lifting men out of the confused morass that is their present state of religion and ritual practice.

Malhotra delineates some lesser known and discussed aspects of *Sundari*. She points to the embedded genealogical story of BVS's ancestor Kaura Mal in the novel, pointing out how the relationship between the Hindus and Sikhs is explored in *Sundari* through the complex relationship between the good Hindu/Sikh Kaura Mal, and the egregious Hindu Lakhpat Rai. She had earlier indexed the transformation of the folksong on which partly the story of *Sundari* is based (specifically its first chapter) and the violence it renders to women's folk genre at the hands of BVS (Malhotra 2020). This occurs in some measure because of the imperatives of writing in prose and bestowing his novelistic characters specific caste and religious characteristics. Malhotra relates gender to the central trope of conversion, discussed below: its portrayal as legitimate by BVS in certain instances (Hindu to Sikh), and as illegitimate in others (Hindu/Sikh to Muslim) in the novel. She shows how the obsessional concern around preserving Sikh/Hindu women's chastity in the novel is discursively utilized to portray more generally Sikh people's purity and morality. Relatedly, she also shows how caste, almost unconsciously, creeps into BVS's portrayal of social life in Punjab, underscoring how caste configurations remained important despite an overt shedding of it by Sikh ideologues (see also Murphy 2015).

Doris Jakobsh, too, addresses the emergence of BVS's *Sundari* in the colonial period; her chapter also extends our understanding of Vir Singh's legacy into the present by building on Fair's work to show what she calls a 'third' life of *Sundari* today (after its first publication in the 1890s and a second one in the 1980s in the diaspora) in the pixelated form of an animated film. This new *avatār* brings a compelling set of innovations regarding the religious symbols and rituals that would mark Sikh women as distinct. A number of practices that were in fact controversial in BVS's time, and by no means normative, were experimented with in the novel. *Sundari* is incorporated within Sikhism through the *amrit* ceremony, for example, and women's names are portrayed as being suffixed with the title of 'Kaur' after their names, as Sundari, later Sundar Kaur, is in the novel. However, as Jakobsh demonstrates, neither practice was normalized until the 1950s. Importantly, in the pixelated version, further experimentation is undertaken. *Sundari* is dressed in the color blue, which is associated with Nihangs and religious personnel, and she sports a turban, which

was controversial for women in the late nineteenth century and not endorsed by BVS (Jakobsh 2003). Sundari, in the novel, wears the traditional *dupaṭṭā* and not a turban, Jakobsh points out, a garment she uses to dress the wounds of an injured Muslim. The visual impact of the animated Sundari is significant, as Jakobsh shows, extending the gender transformations associated with the novel.

Sundari and Vir Singh's other creative work provide a template for continued experiments and tests on women's religious identity, and investment in symbolic markers that would set Sikh women apart. In the colonial period, women emerge as the bearers of cultural identity (Malhotra 2002); Vir Singh's work contributed to this construction. Gunjeet Aurora's chapter on Vir Singh's play *Rājā Lakhdātā Singh* (1910), discussed below with reference to the theme of conversion, points to, and critiques, the lack of women characters in the play, except a widow. This is of interest, as the widow motif emerges in other works by BVS, such as *Rana Surat Singh* (1905), *Baba Naudh Singh* (1921), and many of his tracts; we also see Sundari on her own, unmarried. At the same time, such characters bore a heavy cultural burden. The fact that novels like *Sundari* were a part of the curriculum in the *Sikh Kanyā Mahāvidyālaya* at Ferozepur, set up by the Singh Sabha leader Bhai Takht Singh, underscores the heavy onus of reformist demands on women (Manchanda 2010). Indeed, BVS himself corresponded with Takht Singh's first wife, Harnam Kaur, instructing her on the ideal behavior befitting a pativrata wife, demonstrating the impact on real women of refurbished cultural norms which demanded women's disciplined inculcation (Malhotra 2002, 156–157). Women's agency in BVS's creative works is incumbent on their adhering to and imbibing the reform programs built around them. This entailed, in a sense, their full transformation. This aligns the issue of gender with another trope of central concern to BVS, which worked often alongside it: conversion, a personal transformation that was linked to the articulation of Sikh subjectivity. In some senses, it provided a key location for the articulation of the ideals that drove his work as a whole.

Identity and the configuration of conversion

A trope that repeatedly appears in BVS's fictional writing is that of 'conversion.' The theme appears across almost all of BVS's creative works, including centrally in the trilogy of his novels *Sundari*, *Bijai Singh*, and *Satwant Kaur*. In *Sundari*, for example, its repetitious quality has led Malhotra to call it a 'conversion loop.' Conversion may appear in his writing as one of 'acceptable' religious makeover, e.g., from Hindu to Sikh; or through 'threat' of conversion to Islam; the latter allows the playing out of ideal Sikh/Khalsa characteristics of bravura and undiluted love for *Sikhi* and its symbolic paraphernalia. Murphy's chapter here suggests another way of looking at conversion, linked to Vir Singh's engagement with mystical and

personal transformation within his use of the lyric. What is particularly interesting is the way these diverse modes coalesce and at times contradict.

Malhotra has discussed the importance of the theme of conversion in Punjabi literary and historical imagination in the context of her work on the Muslim courtesan who became a Gulabdasi spiritual seeker Piro (Malhotra 2017, Ch. 3). In Punjab, the subject-matter of conversion, and its literary representation, is not new and merges with that of martyrdom (Fenech 2000). Thus, the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, was 'martyred' by the Mughal state under Aurangzeb in 1675, as presented in the *Bachittar Nāṭak* and other Gurbilas literature, in trying to protect the 'right' of Kashmiri Brahmins to wear their religious markers, the forehead mark (*tilak*) and the sacred thread (*janeu*) (Grewal and Bal 1967; Murphy 2012a). Later, the tenth Guru's two younger sons were also martyred after the defeat of the Guru in December 1704, for refusing to adopt Islam, developing the history of Sikh martyrology. While Hindu positionality on the discourse on conversion is implicated in the sacrifice of the ninth Guru, there is also the case of the martyrdom of the young Hindu Khatri boy, Haqiqat Rai, in the eighteenth century, who too refused conversion to Islam (Grewal and Banga 1975; Malhotra 2012). What is significant about these 'historical' cases is that these all involved males and had a strong public-performative aspect: often, the punishment meted out was publicly performed. With Piro, in mid-nineteenth century, a woman becomes the center of the story of conversion through her voluntary conversion to the Gulabdasi sect and thwarting of 'reconversion' to Islam. Piro also brings in the element of abduction, deploying a mythological bromide in her tale. In her case, it is Piro's self-representational recounting of the story that makes it public. Further, Piro deports religious agonism, between Hindus/Sikhs and Muslims, to establish her autonomy, a woman using her writing to underscore her choice (Malhotra 2017).

In the novels of BVS, Hindu men and women are portrayed voluntarily converting to Sikhism, or Sikh/Hindu men and women are shown resisting conversion to Islam; in *Satwant Kaur*, a Muslim woman comes under the influence of Sikhi. The late nineteenth-century background, particularly the fear of Christian missionaries and their attempts to proselytize Punjabis, both upper caste and lower caste, needs to be kept in mind to understand BVS's obsession with the idea of conversion. The incident of four Sikh boys' putative (or threatened) conversion to Christianity in 1873 at the Church Mission School, Amritsar (BVS's alma mater), which led to the establishment of the Singh Sabha, is well known (G. Singh 1972). In a KTS tract *Jo Iho Hāl Rihā Tañ Asī Dube*, a world turned upside down is depicted where a scavenger caste woman portrays the future as a world where the low-caste converts to Christianity will be dominant; this is because, she notes, the Christian converts were the brothers of the rulers – *isāi sāhib de bhāi* (Malhotra 2002, 86–87). This was also when the Arya Samaj encouraged conversions among the lower-caste Hindus and Sikhs,

and the supposed Muslim converts from Hinduism, through ‘purification’ or *shuddhī* (Jones 1989).

The theme of conversion as developed by Vir Singh in his novels has several new elements. These fictional conversions blur the line between history and fiction. Women’s resistance to accepting Islam acquires an element of violence as when *Sundarī* kills or injures Muslim men to secure her safety and release from captivity. Women in BVS’s novels, even when they are pushed outside the domestic realm, as with *Sundarī*, Sheel Kaur (the *sahajdhārī* wife of Bijai Singh), or Satwant Kaur, do not become autonomous, like Piro, but are sutured to the demands of the community. And significantly, the depiction of Muslim/Mughal power as characterized by illicit interest in Hindu and Sikh women is introduced, echoing a trope developing in other parts of India at the end of the nineteenth century, with fateful consequences in Punjab and India’s subsequent history (Fair 2010; Malhotra this volume). We also see the intersection of issues of conversion and widowhood, a theme highlighted in Aurora’s chapter and discussed above; both occupied a significant space in the public and print discussions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Malhotra 2002, Ch. 3). The widow as a single and vulnerable woman gave opportunities for being ‘converted’ to various agendas of the reformers (Ibid.), and was a character that haunted them through the late nineteenth into the twentieth century. Her ‘vulnerable’ sexuality was imagined as the route to her religious apostasy, a disaster-in-the-making; at the same time, she was also seen as conveniently available to be ‘converted’ to various reformist causes that required sacrifice of social comforts for the sake of community ‘upliftment.’ Also ubiquitous in BVS’s writing is the character of a holy figure, a *saṁt*, who inspires reform and a spiritual cleansing, as in *Raja Lakhdatta* and *Baba Naudh Singh*, and, in other works, a conversion to ideal Sikh behavior, programmatically controlled by a patriarchal figure. BVS, of course, must have had the inspirational figures of the Sikh Gurus in mind with the constructing of such characters but such figures could also resonate with the persona of someone like Gandhi, a ‘holy’ man capable of bringing spiritual and societal transformation.

BVS portrays moral, spiritual, and physical aspects of conversion within *Raja Lakhdatta Singh* (1910), discussed by Aurora, if one can call the awakening of a Sikh feudal leader, the *Raja* or the King, to his duties toward his Sikh subjects in this vein. Aurora discusses the didactic play, where BVS portrays the various communities of Punjab in competition, in the race toward ‘progress’ and ‘modernity,’ annotated by the fear that the Sikhs were being left behind. Aurora notes that BVS does not indulge in vilification of other communities but only pushes for the education of Sikhs as a panacea against various ills that plague the community, including addiction to intoxicants. However, it is significant to note that the ‘awakening’ of the *Raja* takes place in the background of a Sikh orphan being taken for conversion to Christianity by a padre. BVS can be said to use the incident to arouse his

people to moral responsibility as enacted by Lakhdata (literally, giver of lakhs; benevolent) toward the end of the play, to which Aurora draws our attention. However, equally of interest is the failed conversion of a Hindu pandit to Sikhism, who is depicted as being taken away by a padre to convert. The competitive community politics of the Punjabi colonial publics and associational politics, and its optics, were clearly on BVS's mind. There seems to be a complex imaginary regarding conversion, therefore, in BVS's work. An interesting aspect of it is the depiction of Hindus, who sometimes in his writing appear as almost the 'original,' yet religiously and symbolically 'unmarked' inhabitants of India.³ This community is represented as a populace that can be attracted to one faith or the other, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, but who do not themselves 'convert' others. Such a depiction was at odds with the public conversion controversies that organizations like the Arya Samaj created around the turn of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, to which BVS undoubtedly was reacting (Jones 1989; Adcock 2012). His novels also suggest a more complex relationship with Hindus, as Malhotra discusses in her chapter. The notion of conversion, in its multivalent dimensions, signals this complexity.

Closing

In his myriad writings, BVS both popularized and clarified his ideas on what constituted Punjab's religious communities and their distinguishing characteristics, reflecting a broader sense of the urgent need for Sikhs to establish their separate identity. This was seen to be of crucial importance in the colonial political and public sphere, where competing community claims were seen to decide the social, cultural, and economic fate of Punjabi peoples within the logic of colonial governance. At the same time, he experimented with creative forms like the novel and modernist poetic work. There is thus no denying that BVS has shaped Sikh and Punjabi cultural production and religious life in important and enduring ways, and is an important figure to study if we are to understand the emergence of modern Sikh identities and modern Punjabi literary production in the twentieth century. Understanding of this figure, then, allows a fuller view of the emergence of the modern, with its many complications, in South Asia in broad terms, particularly with reference to Punjab and Sikh traditions, and allows for a more textured understanding of the shape of both modern Sikhism and Punjabi literary work in the present.

Notes

- 1 'Bhai' here is used as an honorific title for a learned and esteemed person and is commonly attached to Vir Singh's name.
- 2 Funding for the workshop that gave rise to this volume, and an earlier special issue of the journal *Sikh Formations* that contained prior versions of some chapters, was provided by a Connection Grant from the Social Science and

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- 3 In her analysis of the Nehruvian-era calendar art, Patricia Uberoi shows how the Hindu community is often represented as ‘unmarked’ as against the Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians (Uberoi 2006, 116). Such representation seems to have an earlier history.

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2 Innovation in Punjabi Literature

Considerations on the Advent of Literary Modernity

Farina Mir

Introduction

The history of Indian vernacular literary traditions is written today in a standard form that varies little, irrespective of the immense diversity in the literatures themselves. Literary history in its South Asian guise typically identifies the origins of a language and then recounts its literary production chronologically, from inception to a given point in time, sometimes coming right up to the present. Inherent to the process of rendering the literary past chronologically, such histories periodize literary production (as perhaps does all literary history) using literary, temporal, and/or political markers, often in combination. Literary eras might thus be identified by the dominance of a particular genre, organized by political regimes, or identified simply by a general time period—medieval, for example. Through periodization, literary history aims to provide a schema for literary production, offering a map of change over time. In the best examples of the genre, literary histories provide analyses of the catalyst(s) for change.

The “Histories of Literature” project undertaken by the Sahitya Akademi (India’s National Academy of Letters) exemplifies this mode of literary history. Since its inception in 1952, the Akademi has commissioned histories of the literatures of official Indian vernacular languages by eminent scholars; to date, 18 volumes have been published, each taking more or less the approach described above: linear, chronological, progressive.¹ The Sahitya Akademi histories are undoubtedly significant. In every case, they are an authoritative reference work on the history of an Indian literary tradition; and in some cases, they are the most authoritative contemporary reference.

State-sponsored projects are not unique in their employment of this chronological, progressive approach to the writing of literary history, however. Indeed, even our most sophisticated contemporary engagements with the history of Indian literature are informed by this normative mode of literary history. Take, for example, what may be the most significant volume on India’s literary history published in the last two decades: Sheldon Pollock’s *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Pollock 2003). Identified by one reviewer as “the most penetrating examination

of South Asian literary cultures ever produced” (Smith 2006, 1030), and by another as a “monumental, standard-setting, virtually indispensable, and henceforth presumably authoritative volume with which future workers in the field must contend” (Perry 2005, 86), the volume is in that rare scholarly category of a classic. The volume’s significance is grounded not only in the quality and sophistication of its 18 chapters, but also in its breadth. It includes chapters on Sanskrit, Persian (in India), Indian writing in English, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali, Gujarati, Sindhi, Pali, Sinhala, Tibetan, Urdu, and Hindi. *Literary Cultures in History* has been widely recognized as being “unprecedented in its scope and ambition,” something achieved through its ability to have “brought together a group of scholars with diverse linguistic, historical, and theoretical outlooks” (Bronner et al 2011, 10). A project of this linguistic/literary breadth and scholarly depth could perhaps only have been a collective enterprise. The differences—particularly of disciplinary orientation and theoretical outlook—between the volume’s 17 contributors notwithstanding, they engaged in a shared project of describing, in some cases for the first time, “the origin, evolution, and some of the basic features of one major literature in South Asia” (Bronner et al 2011, 10). Many of the chapters in Pollock’s collection are pioneering works; and all are important contributions. My point here is not to suggest otherwise. Rather, it is to underscore that even in a volume that represents the most sophisticated contemporary scholarship on South Asia’s literary history, and despite “diverse linguistic, historical, and theoretical outlooks,” its chapters share a broad methodology and present literary history through a chronological, progressive rendering. Notwithstanding the dominance of this mode of writing literary history—what we can refer to as a normative mode of writing literary history, perhaps—it is in some traditions, at least, a relatively recent phenomenon.

This chapter focuses on Punjabi literature to consider two aspects of this now normative mode of writing literary history and its emphasis on a chronological, progressive rendering of literary production. The first is to consider what it displaced. How was Punjabi literary history rendered before this normative mode, with its emphasis on chronology and progressive change? What do older forms of Punjabi literary history tell us, and what may be lost in their displacement? The second is to consider how this normative mode of writing literary history has rendered change and newness in Punjabi literature. I am particularly interested in considering the representation of change—whether as intertextual and stemming from within a literary tradition or as a rupture, with causation lying largely in factors external to the literary world. To reconsider the dynamics of literary change and newness in the world of Punjabi letters, I focus on one inflection point in Punjabi literary culture: the emergence of “modern” Punjabi literature.

This transition or process—the shift from pre-modern/early modern and/or traditional to modern Punjabi literature—is in contemporary scholarship

most closely associated with the work of Bhai Vir Singh. And even as scholars work assiduously to inculcate a more nuanced understanding of Bhai Vir Singh's contributions to modern Punjabi literature and history—as in the present volume—his writing continues to be the unwavering benchmark for modern Punjabi literature. Put another way, scholars have asked what kind of modernity is reflected in Bhai Vir Singh's literary production (see Anshu Malhotra in this volume, for example), but have been more circumspect about identifying literary modernity—or forms of literary change and newness that contribute to our understanding of literary modernity—beyond a small canon of acclaimed modernist litterateurs, of whom Bhai Vir Singh is the most prominent.

Rather than taking Bhai Vir Singh's role in the advent of Punjabi literary modernity as given, in this chapter, I ask: what criteria have been used to define modern Punjabi literature? How has the emergence of such literature been represented in Punjabi literary history; that is, what have been identified as the catalysts for change? And, relatedly, what role is colonialism seen to play in producing Punjabi literary modernity? These questions afford an opportunity to reconsider how we gauge change and newness in Punjabi literary production, the catalysts to Punjabi literary modernity, and the singularity of Bhai Vir Singh's role in its advent.

Foundations: from *tazkira* to literary history

From the time of Shaikh Farid's twelfth-century compositions, there has been robust literary production in Punjabi in both poetry and prose.² But despite the range of genres in which Punjabi literature was produced, there is no evidence of literary history in Punjabi prior to the mid nineteenth century. In "Making Punjabi Literary History," Christopher Shackle argues that the earliest traces of literary history are found embedded in mid-nineteenth-century poetry, in the form of Punjabi poets' references to literary predecessors (Shackle 2001). To the contemporary eye, these genealogies of poets barely resemble literary history as they provide little more than the names of poets of the past and sometimes only inferences about their compositions. I will return below to why I think these genealogies, despite being fragmentary, are rich sources for understanding Punjabi literary history. For now, however, let us agree with Shackle that these are attempts within the Punjabi tradition to document a literary past. Shackle further identifies the first prose survey of Punjabi literature (albeit in Urdu): Punjabi poet and critic Maula Baksh Kushta's 1913 text, *Chashma-e Hayat* (Spring of Life). Inspired by and in imitation of Muhammad Husain Azad's magnum opus on Urdu literary history, the *Ab-e Hayat* (The Water of Life, 1880) and originally published as an appendix to Kushta's rendition of the Punjabi tale of Hir and Ranjha, *Chashma-e Hayat* is nonetheless the earliest text dedicated to Punjabi literary history (Shackle 2001, 106). It was, however, quite partial. Although it presented itself as a comprehensive history of

Punjabi literary production, Shackle points out that *Chashma-e Hayat* was clearly constrained by Kushta's predilections for more recent and urban production by Muslim authors in a context in which Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians in both urban and rural settings were also making important contributions to Punjabi literature (Shackle 2001, 102–108).

Its limitations notwithstanding, Kushta's history was pioneering and others soon took up the task of documenting Punjabi literary production. Budh Singh (1878–1931), perhaps inspired by Kushta's efforts and who was, like him, a poet and critic, wrote three important volumes on the history of Punjabi poetry between 1915 and 1925.³ Both Kushta and Budh Singh were foundational to the writing of Punjabi literary history in a chronological, progressive vein, and surely forged new literary-critical ground, as Shackle so ably shows. What I want to emphasize about these pioneering efforts to produce a new kind of literary history for Punjabi is that they drew in important ways on a traditional genre prevalent historically in north India and beyond: *tazkira* or biographical dictionary.⁴ As a genre, the *tazkira* originated in Arabic literature, where it served historically as an encyclopedia or anthology, ranging in subject matter from literature to theology to medicine and astronomy (Heinrichs et al). In Persian literature, the genre was most often concerned with the lives of poets (Heinrichs et al). The genre emerged in India first in Persian literature, and from there was adopted into Indian vernacular literary production.⁵

The Indo-Persian tradition of the *tazkira* is significant to a number of Indian religious and literary traditions. In either context—religious or literary—the purpose of the *tazkira* is largely the same: to memorialize persons/poets/writers of the past. As such, the genre functions as an important form of literary history. *Tazkiras* provide social information about litterateurs and their literary context, and invariably include examples from litterateurs' oeuvres. This information is provided neither in a standard form, however, nor were poets/writers presented in any particular order; while the *tazkira* is a genre with a set of conventions and protocols that constitute it as such, neither a prescribed form or style for the presentation of information nor a particular ordering of entries appear to be among these. The genre does not call for included poets/writers to be organized chronologically or alphabetically, for example. Indeed, *tazkiras* are always organized in an idiosyncratic manner, reflecting the temperaments of their authors. As Frances Pritchett, perhaps the preeminent authority on the Urdu literary *tazkira*, writes, “one of their most conspicuous traits [is]: their individuality, their insouciance, the insistence of each one on defining its own approach to its own group of poets” (Pritchett 1994, 64–65). *Tazkiras*, then, provide insights into how those within a literary tradition—that is, those with intimate knowledge of it—frame that tradition. In their choices of who is included and who excluded and how they organize their entries, *tazkira* authors were exercising critical judgment about a tradition.

Tazkira was the principal genre of literary history in Urdu and Persian, languages that circulated historically in Punjab as languages of education and erudition. It is therefore not surprising that the genre influenced the earliest formal attempts at Punjabi literary history. Kushta's *Chashma-e Hayat*, for example, was an innovation but Kushta took this new turn, according to Shackle, "while preserving something of the *tazkira*'s life-giving core of anecdote and brief quotation" (Shackle 2001, 106). Budh Singh similarly drew on the *tazkira* tradition. As Shackle notes, Singh's book, *Hans Jog*, relies on "the familiar pattern of sequential notices of individual authors with samples of their poetry, beginning with Guru Nanak... and Shaikh Farid" (Shackle 2001, 111). The *tazkira* was undoubtedly foundational to the earliest attempts within the Punjabi literary tradition to compose stand-alone histories of literary composition.

Over the course of the twentieth century, Punjabi literary history moved away from the *tazkira* toward the chronological, progressive rendering that continues to dominate the genre to this day. We can identify the earliest definitive break with the *tazkira* tradition in Mohan Singh Uberoi's 1933 text, *A History of Panjabi Literature (1100–1932)* (Uberoi 1971). Originally written as a doctoral dissertation at Punjab University, Uberoi's study represents a number of firsts: it was the first history to make a claim to be comprehensive of the entirety of Punjabi literary production; it was the first history of Punjabi literature that self-consciously made reference to the primary sources that were the basis of the study (in its original title: *A History of Panjabi Literature (1100–1932): a brief study of reactions between Panjabi life & letters based largely on important mss. & rare & select, representative published works* [emphasis added]); it was the first comprehensive history of Punjabi literature written in English; and it was the first text to render the history of Punjabi literature in what has become, over time, its dominant (chronological and progressive) idiom. Uberoi's text provides a chronological rendering that: one, locates the inception of the literary tradition; two, gauges literary changes, such as the rise and fall in dominance of certain dialects in literary production and the introduction of new genres; and three, periodizes Punjabi literary production, using literary, temporal, and political markers. Indeed, it has all of the hallmarks of what I referred to above as the "normative mode" of writing literary history. Histories of Punjabi literature have been written since, in Punjabi and in English, and while they may differ on what/who is included and what/who is excluded, or on where to mark the breaks in periodizing some 800 years of literary production, they share the same approach to how the literary past is presented.⁶

The deep penetration of this mode of literary history, in both English and Punjabi, suggests the influence of colonial forms of knowledge on the twentieth- (and twenty-first) century rendering of the Punjabi literary past. Uberoi's attempt to present a "scientific" study of Punjabi literature grounded in the analysis of available primary sources (with an emphasis on

a written record) is perhaps not surprising given its production at a colonial educational institution. Punjab University was steeped in what Jeffrey Perrill has called “Punjab Orientalism,” through which “knowledge of Asia [was] acquired through means of Western knowledge, especially through the scholarly techniques of scientific inquiry”—that is, Orientalism—with the Punjab twist being “political pragmatism and fear of change” (Perrill 1976, vi and xi). Punjab Orientalism may have valued knowledge of some Indian traditions, but knowledge of Punjabi was quite another matter. Anchored in late-Victorian ideals of what constituted languages and literatures worthy of study, colonial knowledge devalued Punjabi to such an extent that Punjab University had once debated whether it should even be included in its curriculum. In 1877, while it was still a college and yet to be deemed a university, the College Senate, comprised primarily of British officials, had asked, in the context of this debate: “what is Punjabi? ... is it a literary language?” (Perrill 1976, 461). As may be obvious, these questions emanate from a colonial discourse on language and literature, grounded in European linguistic and aesthetic norms, not indigenous ones. And while Punjabi may ultimately have been included in the curriculum, allowing for Uberoi’s Ph.D. thesis many decades later, that thesis could only but be in a form recognizable to and sanctioned by colonial knowledge.

There are two important points to underscore about this shift from literary histories that clearly took the *tazkira* as their model to those that emphasized a chronological, progressive rendering of the literary past. The first is that when Punjabi litterateurs first turned to rendering their literary past, an extant genre was appropriated as the medium for this purpose, providing an important example of how extant forms could be appropriated in a new (in this case, Punjabi literary) context. That indigenous knowledge and its forms came to be devalued in the colonial context does not mean that they disappeared, of course. To this day, one can see evidence of the way the *tazkira* tradition undergirds some scholarly analyses of Punjabi literature, albeit invariably in Punjabi rather than English.⁷

The second point is that literary history in this new mode of reckoning referenced time in ways that were largely irrelevant to the *tazkira*: literary history now had a known beginning (in the ancient or medieval past) and a literary tradition was forged from that originary moment through to the present. Chronology, with periodization and attendant notions of literary evolution and/or rupture, became the dominant mode of imagining and rendering the history of Punjabi literary traditions. Uberoi’s 1933 thesis exemplifies this.

The representation in contemporary Punjabi literary history of the advent of modern Punjabi literature provides a compelling opportunity to consider questions of the evolution of a literary tradition and also to consider where we find change and newness in Punjabi literary history. Colonialism, as the shift away from the *tazkira* above suggests, is surely an important catalyst of change. But in the overwhelming dominance of colonialism in our

understandings of modern change, I ask below whether other moments of change and newness in Punjabi literature—and/or the historical actors who precipitated them—have been obscured.

The advent of modern literature

The representation of the advent of modern Punjabi literature is an apt place to consider questions of evolution, change, and newness in a literary tradition and also the ways that their causality is represented. Where do change and newness come from? What are they attributed to? How has Punjabi literary history represented the balance between evolution from within a tradition and change from without? The former—evolution from within a tradition—recognizes literary culture as an arena of interaction across time and space with degrees, sometimes more and sometimes less, of intertextuality. Evolution, then, opens up space for understanding literary culture as a tradition (or traditions), with conventions and protocols, without limiting it to being static or incapable of change. The latter—change from without—emphasizes a break from or rupture with the past, and finds causality largely in factors external to a world of letters.

One task of literary history is to contend with changes in literary production and critics invariably employ some combination of evolution from within and change from without. The emergence of something identified by critics as “modern” literature is a significant change in literary production that affords an opportunity to focus on considerations of causation. In histories that frame evolution as coming from within, modern literature is understood as emerging from what came before, emphasizing continuity; literary modernity evolves out of currents within the literary culture, that is, more than from outside or extra-literary influence. In contrast, literary history in what I call a “rupture mode” emphasizes a break from the past. The emergence of modern literature, then, is understood as having been spurred by outside and extra-literary influences. For Punjabi, as my own analysis above of the shift away from the *tazkira* as a form for literary history exemplifies—as indeed for all Indian vernacular languages—that extra-literary influence is colonialism.

Whether writing in the mode of continuity or rupture, Punjabi literary critics and historians agree that modern Punjabi literature emerged during the late colonial period (1858–1947). Indeed, most scholars identify the arrival of modernity in Punjabi literature with the introduction of the Punjabi novel in 1898, and particularly Bhai Vir Singh’s *Sundari*. Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957) was an important intellectual and publisher of his day, and a leading ideologue for the Sikh religious reform organization, the Singh Sabha.⁸ Committed to reforming Sikh practice and representing Sikhism as a modern, rational tradition suitable for British India’s colonial public sphere, the Singh Sabha made effective use of print culture in its campaigns.⁹ Bhai Vir Singh was critical to these efforts through his role in

establishing the Wazir Hind Press, which served the Singh Sabha's agenda, and in his role as a leading ideologue disseminating Singh Sabha ideas through both poetry and prose.

Sundari is a didactic novel that undoubtedly serves Singh Sabha ends. Originally published in 1898 (first through serialization, and then in book form), *Sundari* has enjoyed enduring success.¹⁰ Set in the eighteenth century, during a period of political contention as Mughal rule in Punjab waned and Sikh political formations—first the *Khalsa* and then Sikh *misals*¹¹—were on the ascendant militarily and politically, the novel recounts the harrowing tale of Surasti, a Punjabi Hindu girl abducted by Muslims and saved by a brother whose virtue is grounded in his having joined the Sikh *Khalsa*. Upon being rescued from her abductors by her brother, Surasti, too, joins the *Khalsa*. Rechristened Sundari, she leads a virtuous life of service to the community.

The novel has been the site of sustained scholarly analysis given the social, cultural, and religious significance of Bhai Vir Singh's contributions. Anne Murphy, for example, emphasizes the novel's historical aspects, interrogating the ways that *Sundari* provides "entry into how the [Sikh] imagination of the past was rendered after the annexation of Punjab by the British" (Murphy 2012, 160). Her analysis focuses on the "broad historical vision" of the Sikh past for which the novel was a vehicle (Murphy 2012, 134–145). Nikky Kaur Singh focuses on gender, seeing in Vir Singh's female protagonist an important statement on women's prescribed roles in Sikh society (N.K. Singh 1993, ch. 7). C. Christine Fair analyzes the novel for its complementary discourses on community and gender, arguing that as the novel "communalizes Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim identity," it also provides clear models of masculinity through the depiction of Sundari's plight and Sikh male responses to it (Fair 2004, 154 and 160–166). Most recently, Anshu Malhotra has presented a compelling reading that points to the polyphony of the text, arguing that even as Vir Singh used *Sundari* as a vehicle for particular projects, he undermined those same projects through the text's circularity: "the many stories that unfold in its pages fulfill this [didactic] work, but also unravel it," Malhotra writes (Malhotra 2020, 62). My own interest in the novel is grounded less in a reading of the text, and more in a critical analysis of its place in Punjabi literary history.

Sundari's significance rests less in the book's literary qualities, I suggest, than in the roles it plays in Sikh history and—for present purposes, more importantly—its place in the world of Punjabi letters as the first work of modern Punjabi literature. Indeed, the scholars cited above, despite their very different approaches to the novel and the varied emphases in their interpretations, all appear to accept this designation, even while they may be critical of the extent to which *Sundari* fulfills its own promise in this regard. Rather than do the same, I ask two interrelated questions: one, what defines modern Punjabi literature? And two, should *Sundari* so emphatically mark for us the threshold where Punjabi literature enters the modern?

“What defines modern Punjabi literature?” may seem a basic question, and it surely is. Yet, there is little in the scholarly literature that addresses itself to an answer. Rather, the definition is taken to be self-evident; as is *Sundari*’s status in initiating Punjabi’s literary modernity. Any attempt to answer the question in the abstract will surely be fraught with the same questions that have troubled scholars of modernity in any context (Chakrabarty 2011). So let me take another tack here and consider, rather, in what ways *Sundari* is representative of modern literature. That is, let us attempt to understand the category of Punjabi modern literature based on the category’s foundational work: *Sundari*. On the one hand, *Sundari* is something of an odd choice for the foundational work of modern Punjabi literature. If modern literature is defined by the representation of modern forms of subjectivity (emphasizing both self-consciousness and self-reflexivity) and the nation—undoubtedly a definition grounded in a European context but often taken to be universal—then *Sundari* doesn’t appear to meet the criteria, entirely. Although named for the novel’s main protagonist, the text treats Sundari more as an object acted on by others rather than exploring her subjectivity. If it is a form of national literature, then it is the aspirations of the Sikh community (nation) that are represented here, grounded in loyalty to and reverence for the Guru/*Guru Granth*, not a nation-state forged by joint ideals of secular citizenship. On the other hand, the text is a prime example of historical fiction. Bhai Vir Singh’s text used an imaginary past to construct a history for the Sikh community that would provide it the resources to forge a sovereign community/nation in their present. From a political perspective, this kind of nation-building endeavor is undoubtedly a modern project. Irrespective of my own assessment of the ways that the content of *Sundari* does or does not lend itself to a definition of modern literature, what appears to be more significant to its definition as such by scholars of Punjab and Punjabi is not so much its content, but more its genre: the novel. It is the newness of the novel as a form that marks the emphatic arrival of modern Punjabi literature for scholars, instead of the newness of its content.¹² The crucial answer to the question “what defines modern Punjabi literature?” then is *genre*; the novel has been a critical sign—*perhaps the singular sign*—of Punjabi literary modernity. This emphasis on genre brings me back to the question of causation and literary history.

In Punjabi literary history, modern Punjabi literature emerges by and large as a moment of rupture principally for two interrelated reasons: the arrival of a new genre and the historical context that introduced that genre to Indian vernacular literatures. The novel is, of course, the quintessential modern genre in English literature. In Punjabi literary history, this correlate—that the novel necessarily relates modern forms of subjectivity—has been applied wholesale to the novel’s emergence in Punjabi (an argument that can be extended to other Indian vernacular literary traditions, more generally). The novel was absorbed into Indian traditions as a result of

colonialism, which privileged British/Victorian aesthetic norms, practices, and traditions. Thus, even if the novel became a significant form in Indian vernacular literature (which some might contest, particularly for this early period of its history in India), the roots of the form are undoubtedly exogenous.¹³

One might argue that the proximate context that produced the first Punjabi novel was an indigenous reform movement—the Singh Sabha. Bhai Vir Singh was a prominent Singh Sabha intellectual, and critics generally concur that *Sundari* served the Singh Sabha's ideological ends. But the Singh Sabha, too, is deeply implicated in its colonial context (Jones 1989, ch. 4; Oberoi 1994; van der Linden 2008). Thus, in terms of both context and form, colonialism becomes the main catalyst for the advent of the modern Punjabi novel in existing scholarship; in Punjabi literary history, it is fundamentally colonialism that leads to transformations that usher in Punjabi literary modernity. Newness and change in the modern literary tradition have been interpreted as coming almost exclusively from outside or extra-literary influence.

From *khichris* to critical genealogies

By recognizing that the definition of Punjabi literary modernity relies so heavily on the question of genre, I hope to provide an alternate way of thinking of Punjabi literary history. It is my contention that the emphasis on colonialism and the new genre(s) it enabled in vernacular literary production has obscured other changes and other forms of newness in Punjabi literary culture. The introduction of the Punjabi novel is surely an important milestone, and while it may be seen to usher in Punjabi literary modernity, it is certainly not the only moment or mark of change or newness in Punjabi literature in the long nineteenth century. That is, Punjabi literature was undergoing significant changes prior to the arrival of the novel. Indeed, one of the problems with focusing on a moment of rupture caused from without is that we have been less attentive to the important shifts that emanated from within.

I focus here on one such discernible shift, not of genre, but of *sensibility*: by the turn of the nineteenth century, poets who had once seen their Punjabi compositions as part of a narrative tradition that spanned geographically from the Arabian Peninsula to India, and linguistically from Arabic, to Persian, to Indian vernaculars, now perceived themselves as participating in a regional literary tradition. Rather than requiring new genres for its articulation, this new sensibility found voice through existing genres, ones that proved flexible enough to be harnessed to additional and/or different ends. Recognizing this important shift in sensibility—one that speaks volumes about self-perception and about authors' perceptions of the tradition in which they were participating—is important for a much-needed reappraisal of Punjabi literary history, a reappraisal that emphasizes the

contributions of a broader range of actors in the constitution of Punjabi modern literary culture.

The shift in sensibility that I seek to map is best seen in the transition from *khichris* to critical genealogies. *Khichri* is a term shared by a number of Indian vernacular languages, and most commonly refers to a culinary dish made of lentils, rice, *ghee* (clarified butter)/oil, and spices. In this discussion, however, *khichri* refers to a literary device used by poets to situate themselves and/or their composition in a literary context. It is not a particularly well-known literary device, nor does it seem to have been a requisite feature of any genre of Punjabi composition. But it is prevalent enough to suggest that litterateurs found it effective. My interest in the *khichri* as a literary device and in literary genealogies is longstanding. In my book, *The Social Space of Language*, I referenced *khichris* as a sign of “self-conscious literary historicity” in Punjabi literature (Mir 2010, 9). That work did not explicitly address Punjabi literary history, however, or questions of transformations in the literary tradition, and I have since its publication become convinced that literary genealogies—whether in the form of *khichris* or otherwise—reveal more than self-conscious participation in a tradition through reference to poets of the past. Rather, they also reveal important shifts within that tradition. Here, I attempt to elucidate the latter point.

Crucial to interpreting *khichris* and critical genealogies is an understanding of the broader linguistic and cultural context of Punjab from at least the early modern period (c. 1500–1800). Punjab’s early modern literary culture was, like much of India’s, multilingual. There were spoken, literary, administrative, and sacred languages, some of which overlapped. One would have found in early modern Punjab at least the following languages in circulation: Punjabi (spoken, literary, and sacred), Persian (administrative and literary), Sanskrit (sacred and literary), Braj (sacred and literary), and Arabic (sacred and literary). Access to all but Punjabi (as a spoken language) required formal education and therefore access to resources.

Writing about this era, Christopher Shackle argues that the cultural landscape of India was marked by a distinct diglossia, with “cultural disjunctions between elite and native, *sharif* and *desi*, [that] are too marked to be ignored” (Shackle 2000, 55–56). Shackle concludes that Persian was the language of elite culture, and Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages that of (presumably) low culture.¹⁴ While Persian was surely important to early modern Indian culture, Shackle’s view of such discrete realms of literary production and his attendant emphasis on high and low cultures can be tempered by two arguments.¹⁵ First, rather than distinguishing between Persianate culture and indigenous, vernacular traditions, we should recognize the interplay between them. Doing so would be to heed Shantanu Phukan’s criticism of “a pervasive and largely unexamined assumption of monolingualism in the study of pre-modern

Indian literature” (Phuken 2008, 36). To be fair, I think there exists in the literature a recognition of the influence of literature in one language upon another, but this has usually been envisioned as one-way, top-down, with the adoption of Persian standards, narratives and/or story cycles, and genres by vernacular literary cultures in India.¹⁶ There are, of course, many examples of these phenomena from Punjab. Persian tales such as *Shirin-Farhad* and Persian genres such as *si harfi* (literally: 30 letters) were absorbed into Punjabi literary culture.

The interplay between Persian and vernacular traditions was not solely one-way, however—from Persian to vernacular and implicitly, thus, from high to low. Phuken has shown this most effectively in his work on the ecology of the world of Persian, where he examines the absorption of the Hindi *Padmavat* into early modern India’s Persian literary culture (Phuken 2008). I am not aware of a comparable analysis for Punjabi, despite the signs of similar interplay between literary realms. Take, for example, the Persian-language *Hir-Ranjha* by Baki Kolabi, likely composed between 1575 and 1579.¹⁷ Kolabi, a native of Bukhara who settled in India, not only wrote in Persian but employed a Persian genre, *masnavi*. But the tale of Hir and Ranjha is widely understood as an autochthonous Punjabi narrative. Indeed, Kolabi’s Persian *masnavi* is the earliest known epic-length rendition of this quintessentially Punjabi tale, chosen—by the author’s own account—because it was “on everybody’s lips” (Baqir 1964).

Second, there is little indication that in early modern literary culture a distinction between Persian and Punjabi maps on to distinctions between high and low, or that people participated exclusively in one realm or the other. To take just one example of vernacular literary production in a realm we usually associate with Persian and high court culture: Gang Bhatt (c. 1580s–1590s), a poet at Akbar’s court, composed “Jhagra Hir Ranjha Qazi-ji ka,” or “The Quarrel of Hir, Ranjha, and the Qazi,” in a mixture of Hindavi and Punjabi.¹⁸ The literary heteroglossia of Punjabi poets is, however, most evident in the late eighteenth century (which is likely more a function of the evidentiary base, which is quite thin for earlier periods of Punjabi literary production). Men such as Hamid Shah Abbasi (b. 1748) and Hasham Shah (b. 1752) composed in Punjabi and Persian, among other languages.¹⁹ Theirs was a world of literary multiplicity; yet, they were undoubtedly clear about the tradition(s) they saw themselves contributing to. Two *kitchris* provide clear evidence of this. One is by Imam Baksh and the other by Hamid Shah Abbasi, two contemporaries who composed at the turn of the nineteenth century. These examples also underscore—perhaps most starkly—the shift in sensibility on the part of litterateurs that I am arguing occurred by this time.

Imam Baksh was a late eighteenth-century poet who composed *qisse* (epic-romances; sing. *qissa*) in both Persian and Punjabi. Rather than seeing these as two distinct traditions, however, he presented his Punjabi compositions as part of a Persianate literary tradition. In his Punjabi rendition

of *Laila-Majnun* (a Persian tale widely absorbed into Indian vernacular literary cultures), Baksh wrote:

I took the rice from Nizami and pulse from Hatif
 From Khusraw came the butter, the salt I added myself to make this
 mixture [*khichri*].
 People have composed Persian books [*divan*], intoxicated with love.
 This book is Imam Baksh's, in the Punjabi language.²⁰

Baksh cites three literary predecessors in this *khichri*: Nizami, Hatif, and Khusraw. Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209) is considered one of the greatest Persian poets and the most famous practitioner of romantic epic. His fame rests on his *Khamsah*, a quintet of narrative poems, among them *Laila-Majnun* (the same epic-romance that Baksh was here composing) (Parrello 2010). The reference to Hatif is less obvious. One can surmise that it is the somewhat minor poet Abdullah Hatifi (d. 1521), however, as his compositions were widely published in India from the advent of commercial publishing in the mid nineteenth century, and because he intended to compose a *khamsa* but was never able to do so (Huart and Massé). Hatifi did, however, compose one of the five tales typically included in the quintet: *Laila-Majnun*. Amir Khusraw (1254–1325), like Nizami, is a literary icon. Today among the most celebrated medieval Indian poets, Khusraw composed significant texts in Persian—perhaps most famously his *Khamsah*, itself an emulation of the same by Nizami—and in the vernacular (he is often credited with being the first Hindavi poet) (Sharma 2005). All three, then, were Persian poets. They were from different locales—Nizami born in what is today Azerbaijan, Hatifi belonging to Herat, and Khusraw's fame spread from Delhi. Yet, they were all part of a Persianate culture that spread from Persia to the Caucasus to Central Asia to Afghanistan and India. What is interesting to note for present purposes is that although Baksh was composing a Punjabi-language text, through this *khichri* we see that his self-conceptualization places him/his composition in a Persianate literary culture.

With Hamid Shah Abbasi, we see something quite different. Abbasi opened his 1805 *Qissa Hir-Ranjha* with the following:

I have asked for my rice from Muqbal,
 and have added some of Ahmad's salt.
 I have taken the oil from Gurdas's shop, putting together a mixture
 [*khichri*] which will be relished throughout the land.²¹

Here, again, we find the poet claiming three literary predecessors or antecedents. Shah Jahan Muqbal (c. early to mid eighteenth century) is an important figure in Punjabi literature, though one whose popularity waned precipitously in the twentieth century. We know little about the poet other than that others referred to him as a *hafiz* (one who has memorized the

Quran), suggesting a religious disposition (Kushta 1988). The possibility of a religious leaning is also suggested by his corpus. Three compositions are attributed to Muqbal: *Jangnama Imamein*, *Madah Muqbal*, and *Hir Muqbal*. The *Jangnama* recounts the Battle of Karbala and the *Madah* is a compilation of poems praising holy persons. If Muqbal is remembered today, however, it is not for these overtly religious texts but for his *Hir* (a text with religious undertones, both Muslim and Hindu), which critics generally contend was composed prior to c.1746. Muqbal (and his epic-romance) is less well-known today than other eighteenth-century poets such as Waris Shah and their renditions of the tale;²² and few scholars have analyzed his work.²³ This dearth of interest, however, obscures both Muqbal's historical influence and his text's popularity in the long nineteenth century, both of which are suggested by his inclusion not only in Abbasi's *khichri* but in subsequent poets' critical genealogies, as seen below.²⁴

The Ahmad of Abbasi's *khichri* is in all likelihood Ahmad Gujar, who composed *Hir-Ranjha* in 1682 (Padam 1960). Nothing is known about Gujar's life circumstances, nor are any other compositions attributed to him. From his name, one can assume that he was Muslim belonging to the Gujar community or caste (*zat*), a relatively low status community known primarily as cattle grazers, though in certain geographic areas they are also farmers.

The last poet of Abbasi's triumvirate, Bhai Gurdas Bhalla (c. 1550s–1635), is an important figure in the Sikh tradition and Punjabi literary history.²⁵ A learned scholar and poet, Bhai Gurdas served four successive Sikh Gurus, beginning with Guru Amar Das (Sikhism's third Guru). A confidant of Guru Arjan (Sikhism's fifth Guru), Bhai Gurdas was entrusted with preparing the master-copy of the *Adi Granth*, Sikhism's holiest text, reputedly with Guru Arjan himself dictating it to him (McLeod 1984, 7). Bhai Gurdas was also a poet of repute who composed in Braj and Punjabi. In his *Var* 27.1, he mentions *Hir-Ranha*, along with other love stories (Uberoi 1971, 76).

Each of these poets—Muqbal, Ahmad, and Bhai Gurdas—composed texts quite distinct from one another, employing varying genres and meters. What holds the four poets of the *khichri* together—four, including Abbasi—is that each composed (or referenced) *Hir-Ranjha* in his Punjabi compositions. Abbasi's *khichri* metaphor thus self-consciously places his composition within a Punjabi literary tradition—a marked shift from Imam Baksh's self-conceptualization. As we move further into the nineteenth century, we see the conception of a Punjabi literary tradition with increasing clarity, and poets self-consciously placing themselves within it. The clearest articulation of this comes in the form of critical genealogies within Punjabi compositions themselves. The earliest significant example of this is in Mian Muhammad Baksh's *Saif ul Muluk* (1855), which contains some 70 verses recognizing poetic predecessors. Such genealogies are not without their particularities, of course. In Mian Muhammad Baksh's

case, his genealogy of poets, as Shackle notes, references only Muslims, thus rendering a very partial view of Punjabi literary history (not unlike Maula Baksh Kushta's *Chashma-e Hayat*, which was published some decades later) (Shackle 2001, 103). Such genealogies are nonetheless most instructive for understanding the perceptions of poets and for contemporary understandings of Punjabi literary culture. Thus, despite the fact that Baksh only references Muslims in his literary genealogy, that all of them are poets who composed in Punjabi is an important distinction. Subsequent critical genealogies, however, point to a wider scope of inclusion, though one that remains clearly circumscribed to both the Punjabi language and the region where that was the vernacular language.

Two late nineteenth-century texts provide excellent examples of this. The first is by Kishan Singh Arif, best known for his *Qissa Hir te Ranjha da* (1889).²⁶ A native of Amritsar, Kishan Singh was involved with the era's book trade as both a poet and a bookshop owner/publisher. Kishan Singh wrote a series of *qisse* as well as *kafis* (couplets). His *Qissa Hir* was published in the Gurmukhi script, one of the two scripts in which Punjabi can be written—the other being Perso-Arabic. In the opening pages of this lengthy work (245 pages), Kishan Singh wrote:

Poets have given their thoughts on Hir's condition before ... Those that I remember I'll tell you my friend. Hamid, Hasham, Fazl Shah, Waris, Muqbal ... Hir Hussein, Roshan ... Jog Singh and Kahan Singh, Nar Singh have spoken. Ratan Singh and Krishan Singh Gobind ... Then Bhagwan Singh and Singh Gopal told [it]. There are countless others I haven't given attention to (12–13).

Kishan Singh's list of poets, all of whom composed Punjabi-language texts of *Hir-Ranjha*, is interesting for its diversity. It includes epic-length renditions from the eighteenth century (Waris Shah [composition date: 1766] and Muqbal [composition date: c. 1740s]) and from the early nineteenth century (Hamid Shah Abbasi [composition date: 1805], Hasham Shah [b.1752], and Jog Singh [composition date: 1825]). The rest of his list comprises late nineteenth-century poets, some for whom no other record exists. Among these are those that composed epic-length *qisse* (Fazl Shah [composition date: 1867] and Bhagwan Singh [composition date: 1878]) but also those poets who composed in other genres, such as *si harfi* (Hussein [composition date: c. 1873] and Roshan [composition date: c. 1873]).

Just a few years later, Bhai Sant Bajara Singh included a similar genealogy in his *Qissa Hir wa Ranjha* (S.B. Singh 1894). Singh's epic-length rendition (195 pages) was published in the Gurmukhi script. It opens with two stanzas on his poetic predecessors. In the first of these, Bajara Singh locates his composition in the tradition of Jog Singh and Bhagwan Singh, both of whom were also mentioned by Kishan Singh Arif.²⁷ These references point to the nature of Bajara Singh's text in both form and content; Bajara Singh composed in the same meter (*kabit*) and depicted the *Hir-Ranjha* tale as a

metaphor for the Hindu deities Radha and Krishna, just as Jog Singh and Bhagwan Singh had before him.

Bajara Singh's second stanza points to other sources of inspiration, where he cites Roshan, Muqbal, and Fazl Shah. Muqbal, as mentioned above, wrote an epic-length rendition of *Hir-Ranjha* in the eighteenth century. Fazl Shah (1828–1890), one of the most popular *qissa* writers of the late nineteenth century, composed five *qisse*, among them *Hir-Ranjha*. His *Hir-Ranjha* was published in at least ten editions, suggesting that this was a popular text of the era.²⁸ In contrast to both Muqbal and Fazl Shah, Roshan was the author of a short *Hir-Ranjha* text (first published as early as 1873) which comprised a single *si harfi* (Malik 1991, 164). It, too, was a popular text in the late nineteenth century, published in at least six editions.²⁹

Taken together, the five poets that Bajara Singh cites in the opening of his text range temporally from the early eighteenth to the late nineteenth century. Their compositions vary widely. Some wrote *qisse* in kabit, others in the kaliawala (Kishan Singh Arif) and baint (Waris Shah) meter, and Roshan composed a *si harfi*; some emphasized the similarities between *Hir-Ranjha* and *Radha-Krishna*, others portrayed the story with overtones of Sufi divine love. Bajara Singh's lineage of poets—which seems to celebrate their diversity—points to his conception of the literary tradition he was participating in. Based on his choices, we can surmise that his conception of this literary tradition placed greatest emphasis on the narrative itself. The tale of Hir and Ranjha, after all, is the one feature that ties this group of poets together. At the same time, Bajara Singh delineated clear limits in his conception of the *Hir-Ranjha* tradition. If the tale itself was central to his conception, then so was language. Bajara Singh's list does not include Baki Kolabi, for example, who composed *Hir-Ranjha* in Persian, or any other poet who composed the narrative in a language other than Punjabi.³⁰ Bajara Singh's reference to other poets thus not only suggests his self-conscious participation in a Punjabi literary tradition, but shows us the limits of that tradition both linguistically and geographically.

I see this self-conscious participation in a regional literary tradition as a key shift in sensibility. I have suggested that it is discernible as early as Hamid Shah Abbasi's 1805 *khichri* and that it finds fuller voice in the middle and later nineteenth century in the critical genealogies of poets by poets. Each of my examples has been drawn from the *qissa* tradition, among the most popular genres of Punjabi literary production and circulation from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries, but it is to be found in other genres, also.³¹

The regional sensibility embedded in the critical genealogies above is new, I suggest, and marks an important shift in Punjabi literary production that can be dated to the early nineteenth century. Let me underscore this shift: it is from litterateurs conceptualizing their literary milieu as trans-local and showing fluid lines between Persian and vernacular traditions, to a more circumscribed view of their tradition, one delimited as a regional vernacular tradition that is distinct from other traditions. I am suggesting that

it is a shift that emanates from within the tradition and not one that should be grounded in external, extra-literary causation. Even though the changing political landscape of Punjab and indeed, broader geopolitics, may have played a role, the shift appears to me more rooted in the increasing stature that Punjabi literary production was able to garner vis-à-vis status languages like Persian. At the same time, this shift in sensibility—something thus far unremarked upon in Punjabi literary history—also reveals that our scholarly emphasis on the power and impact of colonialism on Indian society and Indian traditions has obscured other, more subtle shifts in those traditions. More attention to literary traditions over the long durée, and to shifts within them, allows us to see that change and newness in the long nineteenth century were not only in response to or influenced by colonialism; traditions had their own momentum, as it were, and significant transformation was possible without the radical ruptures of colonialism and its forms of knowledge.

To recognize this shift of sensibility in the early nineteenth century as a significant transformation in Punjabi literature is also to suggest different protagonists of change in Punjabi literary culture. Change and newness in modern Punjabi literary culture need not hinge on the introduction of the novel, or the historical context of religious reform in which *Sundari* was produced by Bhai Vir Singh. That is, colonialism and its effects—literary and social/religious—are not necessarily the predominant catalysts for change since we can see that change comes from within the literary tradition also, and in genres that were malleable enough to represent such newness. This is not to suggest that Bhai Vir Singh's interventions were not extraordinary or that *Sundari* is not a significant text. New sensibilities and indeed subjectivities were emerging earlier, as early as the turn of the nineteenth century, and we see them in Punjab's literary culture. This perspective allows for additional, new protagonists to emerge as significant actors in the story of Punjabi literary culture. In the case of Punjabi literary history, the contributions of figures such as Hamid Shah Abbasi, Hasham Shah, and Kishan Singh Arif (until now "minor" figures in Punjabi literary history) to change and newness in modern Punjabi literary culture have largely been obscured by the singular focus on the publication of a single text: Bhai Vir Singh's *Sundari*. Recognizing that a shift in sensibility took place in Punjabi literature, a shift through which we see the clear emergence of a regional, Punjabi sense of self and community seems an important precursor or foundation for the kinds of subjectivity and relationship to place so crucial to the standard definition of a modern literary culture.

Conclusion

Let me close with some broader comments on historical change. Change does not happen in any culture in entirely predictable ways. Scholars have theorized how and when change occurs in structural terms, and I find some

of their insights compelling. William Sewell, for example, has suggested that we think of historical change in terms of lumpiness: “When changes do take place, they are rarely smooth and linear in character ... Lumpiness, rather than smoothness, is the normal texture of historical temporality” (Sewell 2005, 226). Whether we want to think of historical change as smooth and linear with constant incremental changes or lumpy, with occasional bursts of change that ultimately lead to transformations, our challenge—as scholars of history—is to be able to recognize change and newness when it occurs. While the changes associated with ruptures such as colonialism can sometimes be obvious—a new form of literary history or new genres of literary production, for example—other changes, those not amplified by extra-literary events, can be more difficult to discern. To be attentive to the less obvious shifts, the ones that signal new directions from within existing structures, is crucial to developing a more nuanced understanding of a literary tradition. At the same time, it allows for an understanding of a literary tradition that emanates from the literature itself.

Colonialism surely transformed Indian society in many ways. But our emphasis on colonialism as a rupture and/or provocation in the study of vernacular literary cultures has obscured less obvious but equally important changes in those cultures. Focusing on sensibility rather than genre in Punjabi literary history does not foreclose an analysis of the impact of colonialism in vernacular literary culture. But doing so allows us to see change and newness while also being attentive to the continuities that tie colonial-era literary production to its pre-colonial and early modern past. And in doing so, perhaps we are better able to gauge both *continuities* and *discontinuities* in Punjabi literary production and come to a more complex understanding of the advent of the modern in Punjabi literature. Indeed, a more nuanced understanding would begin by recognizing that the advent of Punjabi modern literature did not happen in the creative genius of a single text, but rather was the culmination of a process with antecedents that take us to the early nineteenth century, and perhaps even earlier.

Notes

- 1 For a brief outline of the project through 1984, see Rao (1985, 82–86).
- 2 There is no contemporary, critical English-language history of Punjabi literature. Punjabi was not, for example, included in Pollock’s *Literary Cultures in History*. The best overview reference work continues to be the volume produced by the Sahitya Akademi in its “Histories of Literature” series: Sekhon and Duggal (1992).
- 3 *Hans Chog* (Soul-Swan Peck, 1915), *Koīl Kū* (Cuckoo Coo, 1916), and *Bambiha Bol* (Songbird Song, 1925). Shackle (2001, 109).
- 4 *Tazkira* literally means “memoir” or “aide-mémoire” (Platts 1994, 314). While Shackle writes only of Kushta’s *Chashma-e Hayat*, another of Kushta’s important contributions to Punjabi literary history is his *Punjabi Shairan da Tazkira* [A Biographical Dictionary of Punjabi Poets] (Kushta 1988).

- 5 For treatments of the genre in its South Asian context, see Pritchett (1994, 63–76), Hermansen (1997), and Hermansen and Lawrence (2000).
- 6 A number of important texts on Punjabi literary history have been written since Uberoi's pathbreaking work was published. Both Uberoi's text and these subsequent works, including one of his own, continue to be important to the field. They include Uberoi (1962), Krishna (1973), Sekhon and Duggal (1992), Kohli (1993) and Sekhon (1993–1996).
- 7 One can see evidence of this in the work of scholars trained in indigenous scholarly traditions, such as Piara Singh Padam.
- 8 The most valuable studies of the Singh Sabha have placed the organization in a broader context of both late nineteenth-century colonialism and social reform in Punjab. The most recent of these is van der Linden (2008). Jones (1989, ch. 4) and Oberoi (1994) both continue to be definitive studies of the organization.
- 9 On the Singh Sabha's active publishing program, see Barrier (1992). See also Barrier and Wallace (1970).
- 10 *Sundari* was first published in serialized form in the *Khalsa Samachar*, in 1898, and in book form in 1899. It has been in continuous circulation since it was first published, with over a million copies disseminated and now in at least its 49th edition. See Fair (2004, 137) and Malhotra (2020, 62).
- 11 The *Khalsa* is the Sikh community as reconstituted by the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh. Established in 1699, it was marked by a new authority within the Sikh community that recognized only the Guru and Sikhism's holy scripture, the *Adi Granth*, a new initiation ceremony (*khande di pahul*), and a political agenda to establish Sikh rule. *Misals* are Sikh confederacies that emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to control much of the Punjab.
- 12 See, for example, Sekhon (1993–1996) and Sekhon and Duggal (1992).
- 13 On the novel as a genre in India, see Mukherjee (1984).
- 14 Anne Murphy reminds us that Braj played an important role in elite cultural production also: "if we seek a 'superordinate, usually cosmopolitan, literary culture' to influence Punjabi, we must resort to not one, but two languages: Braj and Persian, which had a powerful influence on cultural production in Punjab through the late medieval and early modern periods" (Murphy 2019, 306–307).
- 15 Persian played a significant role in early modern Punjab, including at the court of the Sikh Gurus. See Fenech (2008).
- 16 See, for example, Muzaffar Alam's discussion of the Persianizing of Hindavi in Alam (1998).
- 17 Information on Baki Kolabi and his *Hir-Ranjha* is compiled from Baqir (1964), J. Singh (1987), and Kang (1998).
- 18 Gang Bhatt is today an obscure literary figure, at best. Allison Busch has, however, identified him as a major Braj poet at Akbar's court. See Busch (2011, 136–138).
- 19 On Hamid Shah Abbasi, see A. Singh (1982), J. Singh (1987), and Padam (1960).
- 20 On Hasham Shah, see Uberoi (1971), Shackle (1985), and A. Singh (1982).
- 20 Punjabi text in Ramdev (1964, 40). This and all translations from Punjabi are mine, unless otherwise noted.
- 21 Cited in Padam (1998).
- 22 Few contemporary editions of Muqbal's *Hir* are available. I located only two during my fieldwork, published in Pakistan in 1978 and 1990.
- 23 While numerous scholars have worked on Waris Shah, almost no one has worked on Muqbal. One notable exception is Deol (1996).
- 24 The popularity of Muqbal's *Hir* is also suggested by its late-nineteenth-century publishing history. It was published in at least 11 editions between 1872 and 1898, which accounts only for Perso-Arabic editions. Punjabi was published in Gurmukhi script, also. On the publishing history of *Hir Muqbal*, see Mir (2010, 212).

- 25 The following profile of Bhai Gurdas is compiled from Uberoi (1962), Sekhon and Duggal (1992), and P. Singh (1992).
- 26 Information on Kishan Singh Arif is derived from Kushta (1988) and Saini (n.d.).
- 27 *Hir Jog Singh* was published in at least seven editions and *Hir Bhagwan Singh* in at least four editions in the late nineteenth century.
- 28 These ten editions account only for those texts published in the Perso-Arabic script. See Malik (1991, 305).
- 29 Extant Perso-Arabic script editions of *Hir Roshan* date from 1873 and 1878 (Malik 1991, 164). Gurmukhi script editions date from 1893, 1895, 1896, and 1900.
- 30 *Hir-Ranjha* was composed in other South Asian vernacular languages. References to compositions are occasionally found in Punjabi texts. Kishan Singh Arif, for example, wrote, “Hir has been prepared in Hindi and Persian. . . Many were also written in Urdu” (Arif 1889, 12–13).
- 31 One sees a similar regional sensibility in *Var Shah Muhammad* [Shah Muhammad’s War Ballad]. See Mohammed (2001).

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3 Print Publics, Literary Experiments, and Community Formation in the Work of Bhai Vir Singh

Arti Minocha

Introduction

Bhai Vir Singh (1882–1957) has been hailed as a harbinger of modernity in Punjabi literature as well as in Sikh theology, exegesis, and religious scholarship. In his own times of the emergence of new, urban public spheres that were facilitated by print activity, he was recognized as a foremost public intellectual. This chapter proposes to read his wide literary oeuvre in conjunction with his contributions to this newly emergent Punjabi “ecumene” (Bayly 1996, 180)¹ or the print-public spheres in late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bhai Vir Singh made important contributions to the Punjab print sphere and journalism through historically contingent genres of literary and historical writing, tracts, the newspaper *Khalsa Samachar* (1899), and through the publication houses set up by him – the Wazir-i-Hind Press (1892) and the Khalsa Tract Society (1894). This chapter argues that the self-representation and consolidation of communities through experimental literary genres in Bhai Vir Singh’s work were made possible at a specific historical moment in the print cultures of late nineteenth-century Punjab.

The cultural terrain of nineteenth-century Punjab, one of the last Indian Provinces to be acquired by the British in 1849, was marked by the exigencies of identity politics, linguistic affiliations, and religious divide between the Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims, and these were enacted through bitter print wars by the reformist presses of the Arya Samaj, the Singh Sabha, and the Ahmaddiya movement. This period of new caste, class, and religious formations was also a time for the consolidation of the burgeoning middle-class which found new opportunities in the fields of education, administration, judiciary, and trade and used “the associational sphere to postulate its own hegemonic claims” (Stark 2007, 146). These “multiple publics” (Bhandari 2007) successfully mobilized the new discursive terrain of print to fix religious canon and practices, rewrite history, negotiate issues of modernity, tradition, languages, caste, class, and religion through “idealized womanhood”. It is in this context of the emergence of these nascent print and public spheres and exigencies of community formation that Bhai Vir Singh’s work can be seen.

Further, the trajectory of print and public cultures also forms the context for literary experimentation and evolution of new genres. An example of such study that connects literary experiments with developments in print cultures is Sisir Kumar Das' compendium, *A History of Indian Literature*, published in two volumes in 1991. He studies the development of modern languages and genres that evolved "in response to a new set of intellectual, social and economic requirements" (73) during the colonial period through three phases of "production of pedagogical materials, socio-religious debates and journalism" (75). Thus, he locates the colonial subjects in the new, evolving publics of their own making.

Subject formation in the new publics

Print and public spheres in nineteenth-century Punjab, of which Bhai Vir Singh was a monumental figure, have largely been seen through the trope of mimicry, not only by the colonial rulers but also in later critical assessments. The following statement is one such example:

India is not England. In the latter country the clash of rival parties in the political world is not taken very seriously. It is regarded as part of the political game In India the ... quasi-educated Indian and even such men as competent vakils regard what they see in print as the truth. They take no pains to verify it; they simply accept it. If this applies to grown-up men it applies with much more force to school boys and students; with a very long experience of India behind me, and with a very large circle of Indian friends, my unhesitating view is that the license given to the Indian Press of recent years has done and is doing more to jeopardize the future of the British dominion in India than any other single case ... it is a policy ... which has not met with marked success judging from recent events in the Punjab and elsewhere.

H.V. Cogg, Chief Commissioner of Coorg
(Home Political (A), no. 265–278, July 1920)

Inherent in the statement is the stance that British attempts to educate the native mind will only produce "quasi-educated", uncritical, mimic men, whose subject position could only be that of mimicry and mere replication of the robust British publicness. This statement was made in the context of the rise of middle-class "public intellectuals" educated through the systems established by the British and who came into prominence through the print and public spheres. Yet, the surveillance mechanisms instituted by colonial authorities show that these "mimic men" had already exceeded their brief. While "mimicry" has been a frequent trope through which subject formation, especially that of the westernized elite, has been studied, political agency has also been described through the vocabulary of "resistance",

“collaboration”, “cosmopolitanism”, “hybridity”, “sly civility”, and “camouflage” (Bhabha 1985; Dharwadkar 1997).

Many assessments of Bhai Vir Singh’s work regard his oeuvre through the trope of influence of Western discourses. His “theological” interventions through exegetical works are regarded as a result of the “theologizing of signs” (Mandair 1996, 204) after the encounter with Western narrative discourses of religion and theology. Mandair argues that the encounter with Western classificatory writings on religion made Sikh reform institutions such as the Singh Sabha more acutely aware of the Christian prototype of religion and hence earlier forms of piety were interpreted through Christian conceptual vocabulary and Western epistemology. “Onto-theological” assumptions inherited from the Western gaze significantly shaped the understanding of religion as a cultural signifier. Ideologues of the Singh Sabha were a part of this “religion-making” that was shaped by a Western gaze and they mediated the imperial culture for their communities “through a process of inter-cultural mimesis between Sikh and European scholars disguised as natural translation” (Mandair 2013, 460, fn 88). Crucial to this argument about the enunciation of a modern “Sikh subjectivity” is the question of native agency at the intersection of mimesis and creativity and Mandair suggests that “the disparity of power relations” (between the colonizer and the colonized) be kept in mind while making these assessments.

Many other influential scholarly studies, for example, undertaken by Harjot Oberoi, Doris Jakobsh (2010), and Ian Talbot have shown how the Punjabi past was reconfigured to meet the challenges arising out of the modernizing impulse of the colonial state, thereby undercutting earlier social and religious practices that were shared by different communities (Talbot 1996, 11–14). The classificatory needs of the colonial state were instrumental in reorganizing the bounds of communities that had earlier been quite fluid in Punjab. Oberoi has argued, for example, that the “older, pluralist paradigm of Sikh faith was displaced forever by a highly uniform Sikh identity, to one we know today as modern Sikhism” (Oberoi 1994, 25). In fact, religion as an abstract and discrete category acquired new meanings in the charged communal dynamics of nineteenth-century Punjab. Studies have shown how the ascription of particular cultural referents such as language, appearance, devotional practices, marriage practices, and personal laws to specific communities gradually led to the hardening of religious identities.

It is in this context that studies on Bhai Vir Singh’s oeuvre have emphasized his contribution to Sikh exegetical studies and the “religion-making” (Mandair 2009, 17) aspect of his work. For example, a detailed study by Harinder Singh discusses Bhai Vir Singh’s editing of Rattan Singh Bhangu’s *Prachin Panth Parkash* ([1841] 1993) to show how he cut out references to any other Indic traditions to consolidate Sikhism as a distinct religion centered around the Khalsa identity (Singh 1990). His literary works have also been largely read as instrumental in shaping the distinctive Khalsa identity

with its history and gendered codes of behavior, which the Singh Sabha reformers sought to consolidate.

Print cultures and the question of agency

Studies on the making of religious identities have emphasized on the mimetic consciousness of the colonized subjects that is assumed to be especially visible through writings on theology, exegesis, and translations of scriptures.² It was assumed that the power of print in the colonial government's hand institutionalized knowledge in the fields of education, medicine, religion, and history and thus made the Indian critical discourse at that time a "derivative" discourse. It is through the example of Bhai Vir Singh that we can argue otherwise.

Print as a radical rupture brought by Western modernity to colonial societies has been questioned by many scholars. Recent scholarship on print cultures in South Asia has questioned the narratives of a unilinear flow of European modernity to the colonies, the rupture in indigenous oral and scriptural traditions brought about by print, and the imagination of the nation through normative European models.³ The story of arrival of modernity and formation of publics in colonial Indian contexts is much more complicated and needs to take into account power relationships in the colonial state, oral cultures, and scriptural practices at specific locations, as well as transnational networks.

Fraser describes print in colonial India as a "collaborative process" as the technology was assimilated with local languages, techniques, and calligraphic traditions. "Print did not therefore emerge against a background of technological nullity, but drew on existing base of skills and mechanical arts that fed and sustained it" (Fraser 2008, 22). The idea of print dissemination marking a special historical moment in the transition from "traditional" to "modern" and "oral" to "written" does not quite hold in colonial Punjab, neither does the Eurocentric idea of print constructing a unified identity in a secular "public" space (Freitag 2001, 67). Scott and Ingram (2015, 359) outline the importance of print culture and religious polemics in constituting the publics in colonial India and "how the legal regulation of publics and the presence of religion in the 'secular' public sphere trouble the normative presumptions of classical liberalism". The publics that they constituted were far from the Western notions of a secular "public" sphere that was separate from "private" concerns such as religion, personal relationships, and the home space. Critical debates in the print sphere included matters of religion, women's reform, cultural practices, languages, and aesthetics, matters that would have been deemed "private" by Western standards.

In the context of the above discussion, it seems to me that the question of agency of the colonized subject in the nascent public-print spheres is a politically critical one, so that one can reiterate the legitimacy of the

question, “Can the subaltern speak through print?”⁴ I wish to move away from discussing Bhai Vir Singh’s work in terms of theological “certainties” that were influenced by Western epistemological frameworks, to explore the agency that was, at this point, located at the conjunction of new print spheres, literary experiments, and community formation. At the same time, the question of agency beyond the “onto-theological” assumptions of the West cannot become a project to recuperate an authentic “original” meaning of Sikhism that was enunciated by the Gurus and that was lost through the imperial encounter.

This chapter is a tentative and provisional attempt at thinking through this agency in two ways: the first, Bhai Vir Singh’s participation and influence on the print-public sphere in Punjab and his stature as a public intellectual. The second part of this chapter discusses his formulations of the historical and the religious and the generic experiments that emerge from an encounter with “scientific” discourses on history.

Bhai Vir Singh’s influence on the print-public spheres in colonial Punjab

Bhai Vir Singh and other public figures like him, who were trained in multilingual and multicultural indigenous traditions as well as through westernized education systems, were able to make use of the emerging “associational publics” (Bhandari 2007, 269)⁵ and a culture of debate and public discourse to create indigenous, affective knowledges that combined indigenous forms of social communication with new technologies. Participation in literary cultures, social activism, and publishing activities became part of being a “public intellectual” that came to be associated with immense cultural capital. Dayal Singh Majithia, founder of the English daily *Tribune* (1881), Munshi Naval Kishore, founder of the influential Naval Kishore Press at Lucknow and Lahore (1858), Harsukh Rai, founder of the Koh-i-Noor Press (1849), Bhai Chattar Singh, founder of the Chattar Singh Printing Press in Amritsar (1880), and Munshi Muhammad Azim, founder of the Lahore Chronicle Press (1849) are other examples of writers/publishers who were fashioning a new public culture and national discourse. Thus, as Dharwadker concludes, print led to the emergence of newer forms of agency of the colonial subjects, changed protocols of solidarities and social networks, and new aesthetics of literary modernity despite surveillance and control of colonial authorities:

With its burdens of incompletely translated and substantially hybridized Enlightenment activism, quasi-civil society protocols, and pro-public-sphere conventions, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian print culture succeeded in engendering a large number of historical actors whose agency may have been severely curtailed in specific political regimes, but who nevertheless retained the power or

counterpower, as Karl Marx had hoped idealistically, to change the conditions of their existence.

(Dharwadkar 1997, 120)

In this sense, Bhai Vir Singh's contributions to the newly emergent public and print spheres can be assessed as more than simply being a Singh Sabha ideologue and his writing can be seen as more than religious polemic. Thus, cultural and critical debates and interventions in medicine, religion, education, and aesthetics charted their own course through the print worlds of the Wazir-i-Hind Press, Khalsa Tract Society (KTS), and other prominent publishing houses, despite colonial impact and surveillance.

Important scholarly works have suggested at least two ways in which the Punjab print sphere offered resistance or "resilience" (Mir 2010, 6) to the colonial discourse. Bayly locates this resistance in the strong scriptural and oral traditions and ways of communication in the pre-colonial ecumene, which strategically appropriated the print media.

... it was the local, decentralised networks of knowledgeable people on the fringes which carried the deepest power of social change- owners of lithographic presses, sellers of herbal pills in western containers, sepoys returning to their villages with western scalpels, muskets and clocks, rich villagers who procured British revenue maps – this was critical level of activity of new techniques and knowledges spreading along older lines of communication.

(Bayly 1996, 314)

It was in these lived, everyday gestures that new technologies were inventively adapted to older ways of oral communication and scriptural traditions and thus became a locus of agency of the colonial subjects, cutting across rural-urban and class divide in Punjab. Farina Mir's study *The Social Space of Language* suggests another trajectory through which the agency of local actors can be traced. She locates the "resilience" of the print sphere in colonial Punjab in the Punjabi language and literary culture, centered around the textual and oral traditions of the *qissa*. Punjabi survived because it was affectively attached to the ways of imagining life, social relations, devotional practices, and commerce. Thus, the linear narrative of language, religion, and community continuum is completely undercut by the complexity of the print cultures in Punjab.

It is in this context of the assumed religion-language affiliation that one can study the publication lists of the Wazir-i-Hind Press and the KTS, institutions established and sustained by Bhai Vir Singh that pioneered publishing as an "intellectual" activity. The "hypertextuality" (books referring to each other) of books and the "multilingual repertoire" (Orsini 2002, 129) of Punjabis that publications of the Wazir-i-Hind Press and KTS indicate undermine the assumption that these presses could simply fix the

affiliation of language to religion, although Sisir Kumar Das describes the “slow transformation of a Sanskritic-Persian literary tradition into a ‘Sikh-Punjabi’ tradition” as a unique Punjabi situation in the nineteenth century (Das 1991, 61).

A whole host of original works published in Urdu (including self-help books), translations of Bengali novels into Urdu, popular detective novels and short stories in Urdu and Punjabi, published by the Wazir-i-Hind Press and KTS, indicate that publishing houses as commercial institutions had to be mindful of multiple language competencies in the public world and were a locus for traffic between languages just as they performed the ideological work of associating languages with communities.

Reports on Publications in Punjab indicate that the earliest translations of Bankim’s works were done in Urdu and published by KTS. Other translations of Bengali novels that followed included *Durgesh Nandini*, *Chandrakanta*, *Kusumkumari*, and *Fatih-i-Bengal*, all published in Punjabi and recommended as readings for women in periodicals such as *Punjabi Bhain*. Translations of Russian novels included works of Tolstoy, Gorky, and Chekov and translations of European novels included Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, works of Swift, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Bacon, Emerson, Goethe, Cervantes, and Homer (1910),⁶ thus opening a window to world literature, especially for women.

Interesting developments in the genre of fiction were the popularity of the cheap, serialized Urdu novel, the *Char Damri ka Novel* (pice worth novel) (*Report* 1894) and detective novels in Urdu and Punjabi, many of which were published by the KTS. The 1920 *Report* notes with approbation the growing popularity of detective novels and short stories in Urdu and Punjabi, some of which were also translations of “cheap” English novels. Bhai Lal Singh’s “Paret da Murda” (1913), Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid’s “Sanduq da Murda” (1912), and “Jagat Tamasha”, a Punjabi rendering by S.S. Charan Singh of a French detective novel (1921), were all published by the Wazir-i-Hind Press.

Catalogues of Books pertaining to the year 1910 list many detective stories published by KTS and Wazir-i-Hind Press, such as *Anokhi Dayin* (2000 copies) and *Lampat Shikari athwa Shayam Kumari* (600 copies). Thus, these publishing houses became venues for literary experiments in genres that emerged through contingencies of time, popular traditions, and tastes rather than being merely imitative of Western influence. Although these presses are regarded as instrumental in disseminating reformist messages and sanitized, elite literary tastes, the publication lists prove otherwise.

These presses established by Bhai Vir Singh and actively supervised by him were also an important locus for negotiation between the popular and the elite, the traditional and modern genres of expression, as the use of *jhaggras* and *qissas* to disseminate reform ideology indicates (Malhotra 2012, 159).⁷ Titles of some such traditional genres that were modulated to

spread reformist messages through print are “Jhaggra Maa Dhi” (Wazir-i-Hind, 1910), Kirpa Ram Bhagat’s “Jhagra Tili Laung” (1912), Bhai Kishan Singh’s “Qissa-i- Dulla Bhatti” and “Chharenama” (1912). The presses were thus agential in responding to the needs of the time, evolving a literary climate, and shaping literary tastes.

Women’s subjectivities on grounds of print

The gendered aspect of the creation of taste brings one to another aspect of the significance of the two presses established by Bhai Vir Singh in constituting the gendered reading subject. In what appears to be a contradiction, a tract published by the KTS, “*Hir Ware Shah de Phal*” (The Consequences of Reading Waris Shah’s *Hir*, 1898), warns women that they should give up reading of love tales like *Hir* and devote their leisure to the study of religious books, in the process acknowledging that women’s reading and listening practices subverted reform prescriptions.

Bhai Vir Singh was closely associated with the editing of *Punjabi Bhain* (1907–1918), a women’s periodical brought out by Takhat Singh and Harnam Kaur at The Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya at Ferozepur, published at the Wazir-i-Hind Press. The Press also published *Istri Satsang*, another women’s periodical. Letters, articles, and literary pieces strewn across these periodicals attest to the value that reading, reading aloud and sharing, writing, and possession of books came to have for middle-class women. Reading a book or reading aloud to a community thus became a material marker of modernity and an activity that would shape a new literary sphere for women. This opened up conceptual spaces and performative sites where new performances of womanhood could be enacted and pre-defined identities and affiliations challenged.

One of the modes of subjectivity that became possible on grounds of print was a claim to professional authorship and the “intellectual” work that it involved. These aspirations to literary cultivation and authorship are clearly visible in the women’s periodicals mentioned above. For middle-class, educated women, inclusion into this sphere of writing also meant cultural power, self-affirmation, and the possibility of gendered solidarities. The periodicals also functioned as new grids that kept women informed about each other and helped in forming social and educational networks. They offered regular and detailed reports on Social Conferences, Education Conferences, Stri Diwans, and Women’s Education Conferences in Punjab that were regarded as important ways of forging links. Thus, these periodicals give us a rich account of the first stirrings of political and literary subjectivity of women in the “modern” print sphere.

Bhai Vir Singh and the literary circles and publication houses that he established then played a crucial role in the formation of new print publics and new gendered subjectivities formed on grounds of print. Clearly, all configurations of the public that these literary circles and presses promoted

were not experienced through tropes of religious collectivities, as has been largely discussed in the context of Punjab. Mulk Raj Anand recounts Bhai Vir Singh's contribution in making literary culture an important constituent of the new public sphere.

It was because Bhai Vir Singh did not become the reciter of the Guru Granth in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, but remained a poet, that many of the younger secularists in Punjab could dare to proclaim the profession of poetry as an independent and noble calling, more important than the contractor's business or Babuism (Anand 1973, 80).

It is important to reiterate here that the new literary cultures centered around print did not mark a neat rupture between "print" and "orality", and "tradition" and "modernity". Many scholars such as Pollock, Orsini, Bayly, Blackburn, Malhotra, and Mir have traced the continuities between pre-print oral and scribal cultures and print cultures of the nineteenth century in terms of genres, performativity, and community participation. Tracts and books being read out at *kirtans* in girls' schools (*Punjabi Bhain*, January 1911), appeals and tracts being distributed at Sikh Educational Conferences, newspapers being read out to groups of people, participation of women in reading and recital sessions, exhortation by women in periodicals to read aloud to other women (evidences of which we get in these periodicals), and oral genres modulating themselves to the "realism" of reform (the *qissa*, *baramasah*, etc.) are all examples, that we find in the archives, of oral practices being reinforced by print.

The popularization of reading through traditional congregational settings and oral forms such as *kirtans* and *kathas* by Bhai Vir Singh in the print-Mecca of the Wazir-i-Hind Press describes this synthesis of orality and print that qualitatively impacted the trajectory of print. Mulk Raj Anand's description of one such *baithak* in the Wazir-i-Hind Press that his mother took him for illustrates this:

I remember the sessions I attended when Bhai Vir Singh recited some of the passages from the bardic narrative of his epic poem Rana Surat Singh. Because he used much conversational Punjabi, the *Katha* was more intimate, than that of the Guru Granth The audiences in these recitals were composed mainly of women, married, unmarried and widows. I used to get the feeling that all women of Punjab seem to discover themselves, through the sympathy of Bhai Vir Singh for the widowed queen.

(Anand 2002, 95–96)

The literary and the print world of books that Bhai Vir Singh established had an emotive and affective connect rather than being an impersonal presence. This print sphere lay at the conjunction of the "real" world, where day-to-day experiences could be expressed through an affective charge and a discursive space where the "new", modern woman could be imagined.

Thus, as scholars have suggested, the idea of the “public” in the colonial context needs to be rethought in terms of corporeality, affect, community relations, and modes used to represent the self rather than exclusively through tropes of religion and nationalism (Freitag 2001, 35–75; Scott and Ingram 2015).

Discussion on the gendered reading subject needs to take into account extremely low levels of female literacy in Punjab. A whole lot of evidence from Punjab proves that literacy was not a precondition for people to access print cultures and this applies to women as well. Explaining the large number of poetry publications in Punjab, the *Report* of 1886 explains how orality co-existed with, and in fact was, a part of print culture:

There is inordinate passion for poetry among educated and illiterate people of the Province. In many of the cities and large towns of the Punjab, especially in and about Delhi, poetical societies called *musha'arahs*, of which the members assemble periodically to recite their *ghazals* or other poetical compositions. The highest aspiration of these poets is to gain the applause of auditors. In almost all villages groups of inhabitants assemble to hear poetical recitations, which they enjoy and value as a sort of mental treat.

Agriculturists using maps, marginalized groups, including prostitutes, presenting memoranda to colonial authorities as modes of protest (“Selections from Vernacular Newspapers” 1873), the sale of *qissas* at *melas*, the consumption of “entertaining” literature in the form of *qissas*, *jhaggras*, *sangit*, *thal*, and romances in a province where literacy levels were very low point to the vital life that print had outside the literate middle classes and therefore the existence of many print publics. This also points out that reading practices and consumption of literary forms and print cannot be easily plotted along the axis of class or the rural/urban divide.

As part of the reform literature, the Wazir-i-Hind Press and the KTS published many readers, tracts, self-help books, and health books that were specially addressed to women. Examples include *Dulhan Patarka*, a letter writer for females by Gyani Hazara Singh (Wazir-i-Hind Press, 1912), *Dulhan Darpan* (Wazir-i-Hind Press, 1880) by Bhai Hazara Singh, a Punjabi translation of the well-known Urdu novel *Mirat-ul’u-rus*, or the “Bride’s Mirror” by Maulvi Nazir Ahmad that continued to be prescribed as a Punjabi reader for girls well into the second decade of the twentieth century. KTS pamphlets for women included *Udar Nivas*, a pamphlet on child care and care of mothers, *Bachche Palan Dian Matan* and *Mavan Lai Prashnotri* (1913), a pamphlet in the form of questions and answers (*sawaal-jawaab*) addressed to women in a form that would appeal to them.

Books and pamphlets on health and medical advice to women, which would very often be distributed free, include *Istri Rog Darpan* (Urdu and Punjabi, Wazir-i-Hind), *Prasuta te Mata Prabodh* (1913, Wazir-i-Hind),

Istri Chikitsa (Kahan Singh), *Istri Rog Chikitsa* (Bhai Mohan Singh, 1914), and Mohan Singh Vaid's *Grah Prabandh Shastra ate Arogtā*, a manual of domestic economy and hygiene (1914). This literature consolidated knowledges about communities around the images of "modern" women and has been discussed as an example of the "biological-rationalist interest of social reformers" (Kumar 1993, 50) in the development of healthy races.

At the same time, a careful study of the periodicals mentioned above gives us an important insight into how women themselves reframed these debates about their bodies and responded to issues of their health, sexuality, new medical subjecthood, and entry into medical professions. The point being made here is that print cultures that evolved due to the efforts of litterateurs like Bhai Vir Singh were also a locus of the agency of local players, which was not necessarily channelized only into communal and national identity formation. It is also significant to note that reform and colonial discourses about women, especially in the context of the formation of nascent print publics, opened up a range of possibilities for women as readers, writers, and consumers of literature, and did not merely fix them as victims of discourse.

Generic experimentation

The questions of literary modernity and agency can also be addressed through a study of the "ideology of aesthetics" (Majeed 2012, 264) and self-conscious experimentation with genres by Bhai Vir Singh, especially in his formulation of the religious and the historical. Critical assessments have claimed that particularly his exegetical and theological work is mediated through Western theological judgments and ends up as being derivative. Critical accounts of his work have also separated his "modern" literary experiments from his treatment of the historical and religious and have thus tried to "reconcile" his literary modernism with traditionalist Sikh thought.⁸ Sekhon and Duggal, for example, describe him as having "upheld the torch of modernism in Punjabi literature" (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 109) but conclude that devotion to Sikh thought and religious philosophy "bound him down to what he inherited in the Sikh tradition" (Ibid., 110).

I wish to present a case where we look at Bhai Vir Singh's textual practices and narrative methods not only as a smooth translation of Western assumptions to his audience but as a strategic use of genres and dislocation of assumptions about them. Therefore, the question of the articulation of Sikh/Khalsa identity can simultaneously be understood as a question about the generic formulations in which identities could be encoded. Developments in genres, aesthetics, languages, and identity formation take shape under specific historical situations and mutually influence each other. Majeed points out "how the self-conscious sense of being modern was used by South Asian writers as an ideology of aesthetics in order to distinguish

themselves from their traditional predecessors”, and therefore, a “dialectical interplay between a mutually sustaining modern and pre-modern poetics” (Majeed 2012, 264) being a hallmark of modern South Asian Literature.

At this juncture, one needs to remind oneself that generic categories such as biography, novel, travel writing, and poetry that *Reports on Publications* employed to classify published material, were mediated through the literary judgment of the Report writers, who were English-educated Indian officials of the Department of Public Instruction. *The Report* (1902), for example, praises “a class of young men” who were “products of schools and colleges”, whose biography writing “reveals dawning of a new spirit – not mere graces but a closer study of the subject and examination of facts” (*Report* 1902). In many instances, pre-existing generic categories were applied to writing that defied these and the merits of such “biographies”, “histories”, and “novels” were judged on prior expectations. So, for example, Bhai Suraj Singh’s *Srimati Bibi Harnam Kaur* (Punjabi, 1908), published by the Wazir Hind Press, highlighted the life of Bibi Harnam Kaur as a living legend and combined the mythic and the present to offer her as a model for Sikh women. Another attempt at writing her biography by Karam Singh sought to give it more credibility by modeling his work on “European biographies” (1907). Explaining that there was no tradition of diary writing in Punjab because people believed in “*upkar*”, not “*ahankara*”, he nevertheless sought to make the biography more credible by giving factual details from “sources” and interviews, about Bibi Harnam Kaur’s education and specific dates of birth, marriage, and life-events. These examples illustrate the contention being made here that experiments with genres were not merely imitative and that generic innovations, literary, and linguistic sensibilities can be examined as a locus of the agency of historical actors. In the above examples, tropes of history, memory, literature, and “romanticization” are used simultaneously in the representation of a new “modern” subject. Therefore, attention needs to be paid to a whole range of self-positionings and “subjectivities between Anglicized hegemony and indigenous subalternity” (Codell 2003, 189).

Bhai Vir Singh’s introductory volume in a series of the fourteen-volume scholarly work *Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth* (1929–1937), which I take up briefly, is a case in point. Bhai Santokh Singh’s *Sri Gur Pratap Suraj Granth*, also known as *Suraj Prakash*, was a series of volumes covering 6,622 pages and Bhai Vir Singh worked for 11 years (1925–1935) on its editing and analysis. It is a comprehensive history of the Guru period in the Sanskritized Braj verse of the early nineteenth century that was completed in 1843. Another significant editorial and analytical exercise undertaken by Bhai Vir Singh was the editing of Rattan Singh Bhangu’s *Prachin Panth Parkash* (originally written in 1841). In his assessment of Bhai Vir Singh’s work, Fenech comments, “it seems that Vir Singh both deleted anything he felt was contrary to his vision of Sikhism and added passages which supplemented his Tat Khalsa-aligned interpretation” (Fenech 2001, 20–31).

Bhai Vir Singh's exegetical projects were undertaken in response to the British productions of history and the alleged "misrepresentations" of Sikhs in historical literature and English translations by British ethnographers as exemplified by Ernest Trumpp's *Adi Granth* and *Dasam Granth* (1877), John Malcolm's *A Sketch of the Sikhs* (1812), and J.D. Cunningham's *A History of the Sikhs* (1849). His editing of Bhai Santokh Singh's voluminous work demonstrates his own immense, scholarly range of the knowledge of literary and philosophical traditions of English, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Braj, and Hindi. The sources of his editorial interventions cited in the footnotes include an eclectic range from written history, mythology, folklore, scriptures, hagiology, literary traditions, contemporary scholarship, and cultural practices.

The first volume, in which Bhai Vir Singh provides an introduction or "*Prastavana*" to Santokh Singh's text, details his own methodology and sources and the significance of the text to Sikh "history". The crux of his editorial efforts lies in the two "modern" forms that he adds to the original – his own "Introduction" and the voluminous footnotes which weave together rational explanations and proof, mythical beliefs, and literary references. The biographical note that he provides on Bhai Santokh Singh brings together the historical, the oral, and the literary. He says that he has put together the life of Bhai Santokh Singh in the form of a literary piece by talking to older people and scripting it through appropriate *chhands* and *alankars*. Thus, he invokes the factual, the popular, and the literary in creating the biography of Bhai Santokh Singh.

History as fiction and fiction as history

Significantly, the introduction that Bhai Vir Singh writes to *Suraj Prakash* in the first volume also consists of contemplation on historical methods and the philosophy of history itself that is traced from both Western and Indian traditions. The genre of "history" was being experimented with in the latter half of the nineteenth century to record changes through the eyes of the colonial subjects. Mufti Ghulam Sarwar's *Tarikh-i Makhzan-i Punjab* (1884), Rai Bahadur Kanhaya Lal's *Tarikh-i-Lahore* (1867) and *Tarikh-i Punjab* (1877), and Syed Muhammad Latif's *History of the Panjab* (1889) and *Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities* (1892) are a case in point.

Bhai Vir Singh critiques as inadequate the purely scientific notion of history, which believes in material truth and is suspicious of metaphysics. Citing the example of Griffin's history of Ranjit Singh, he explains how a biased, limited understanding of history can claim to be objective simply because it enjoys cultural power associated with anything Western. The truth claims of such histories need to be countered by other kinds of histories that take into account the literary, the anecdotal (*vritantik*), and the spiritual (*adhyatmik*). He cites examples of other kinds of histories from

the Punjabi tradition, such as *saranshik* history, written by witnesses. The accounts by Guru Ramdas, Guru Amardev, Bhai Nandlal, Bhai Gurudas, and the *Sakhian* are cited as examples of such history. *Savistaric* history, the one to do with evidence, is exemplified by the *Balevali Sakhi*, Gurbilas, and accounts by Bhai Mani Singh, Bhai Sukha Singh, and Rattan Singh Bhangu.

Another kind of history that Bhai Vir Singh lists is *sarvpriya itihaas* (popular history), which appeals to the hearts and emotions of people. He cites the example of *Suraj Prakash* as valuable for this element. Countering the emphasis on empiricism in history writing, he says that there is a need to understand “*ruhaniyat da itihaas*”, which is not the history of kings, wars, bravery, and revenge but of spiritual experiences of people like Plato, Christ, Kabir, and Guru Arjan Dev. Scientific historians should not attempt to write these histories because “*andarli pakad*” (inner grasp) escapes “*bhautik itihaas*” (empirical history). Thus, according to him, merely rational notions of history have their limits and cannot be universally applied to encompass experiences of all cultures. Similarly, according to him, mythology, religion, and poetry describe religious experiences which contain many truths (Singh [1843] 1961–65, vol. 286), not necessarily the one scientifically proven.

This, however, is not a mere dismissal of the rational frameworks of history, as adopted in the West. He cites developments in Western science to prove that temporal and spatial absolutes have been questioned even by scientists such as Einstein. Einstein says that the human mind registers only three dimensions and is alien to other dimensions of experience and space (Singh [1843] 1961–65, vol. 4, 1040). He refers to Jord’s *Guide to Modern Thought* and Helen Wilman’s *Conquest of Death*, which describe experiences beyond the rational to suggest that feats performed by the gurus that seem to be miraculous are not implausible and can be performed through self-will.

Implying that modernity can have a reverse flow, that is from the east to the west, Bhai Vir Singh says that even science is opening up to experiences of the subconscious mind. Scientific discourse uses terms like auto-suggestion and the “sub-conscious mind” to analyze experiences such as that of Babur, who vowed to take Humayun’s death upon himself and succeeded in willing his own death. He also shows that certain generic forms carry cultural power and credibility simply because of certain assumptions associated with them. So, an autobiography or biography is considered more accurate and scientific than a *karamaat* (miracle), and so, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangir* accounts are considered more believable than Kabir’s account of miraculously surviving in the waters of the Ganga.

Bhai Vir Singh explains that there is a vast repertoire of experiences that cannot be rendered through the framework of human understanding, for example, the entry into *Sachkhand*. It is therefore rendered by the poet through heightened literary devices so that it can be commonly understood.

He talks about the untranslatability of experiences, and yet at times, uses scientific discourse to explain incidents in the life of the gurus. For example, the guru's healing of his followers at Kartarpur is explained through reference to bacteriology and the belief that, perhaps, lower forms of life also have a soul (*ruhani duniya*) and one's own body and mind can protect one from disease (Singh [1843] 1961–65, vol. 1389).

Religious and historical experiences are formulated through the weaving together of the factual and the spiritual, the empirical and the mythic, the temporal and the imaginative. They merge the embodied, affective charge of orality with the realism of commentary on contemporary social practices and morality. So, while places, artifacts, and events during the travels of Guru Nanak would have an associative value in the text, they are marked as real-time locations in the footnotes by the editor and brought in continuum with the present and the contemporary. To mention a few examples, quality of the *ber* fruit in the present time attesting to the veracity of the incidents at the Ber Sahib Gurdwara near Kapurthala; evidences of Guru Nanak's travels to Tibet and China taken from various sources such as Bhai Gurdas manuscript, *Tawarikh Khalsa*, and narratives by Bhai Kashmira Singh, Bhai Didar Singh, and some Tibetan lamas are corroborated by the locational specificity of these places in the present, including images on the road from Simla to Tibet.

Conclusion

The above discussion shows that framing religious and historical experiences through different thought systems, genres, and paradigms available produced its own disjunctures and contradictions that could not easily be smoothened over. In the case of Bhai Vir Singh's writings, these are visible in the use of multiple traditions and influences that he welds together. Historically contingent genres that evolved at this time sought to capture experiences that had multiple stimuli – local, transnational, oral, scriptural, mythological, and performative. Rather than read Bhai Vir Singh's presence in public and religious discourses as imitative, I have tried to argue that the public and print spheres of the time perhaps afforded possibilities for newer subjectivities to emerge. It is in literary experimentation, reading, writing, and linguistic practices that one can locate the agency of the colonial subject who did indeed speak through print.

One of the modes of subjectivity that it produced is that of hybridity that charted its own trajectory in different situations. The print sphere became a ground to register experiences of modernity and define its literary expression. This print sphere and the generic categories that it generated were marked by fluidity and experimentation according to the social needs of the writers rather than “fixing” genres, philosophies, and communities in the classificatory schema of the colonial authority. Bhai Vir Singh's oeuvre allows us to look for the “in-between spaces”, “innovative sites of

collaboration, and conversation, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha 1994, 1).

Notes

- 1 Bayly’s (1996, 180) use of the term as distinct from “public sphere” suggests that public spheres that developed in colonial India were different from those in modern Europe that have generally been taken as a prototype.
- 2 For example, Macauliffe’s *The Sikh Religion: Its Gurus, Sacred Writings and Authors* (1909), a project undertaken from 1889 to 1909, has been regarded as an example of a European project in which the Sikh elites collaborated. Bhai Kahn Singh Nabha and Giani Hazara Singh helped Macauliffe in compiling this work.
- 3 Some seminal works on South Asian print cultures that have argued that print was not a radical rupture are Fraser (2008); Scott and Ingram (2015); Freitag (1991); Orsini (2009); Naregal (2001); Dharwadkar (1997); and Gupta and Chakravorty (2016). In the context of Punjab, the links between the oral, performative, and print have been explored by Malhotra (2002) and Mir (2010).
- 4 Dharwadkar (1997, 113) discusses this question in the context of the subjectivity and agency of the colonized people.
- 5 Vivek Bhandari (2007, 269) talks about the *anjumans*, *sabhas*, and *samajes* that were new forms of association in the public sphere.
- 6 *Reports on Publications Issued and Registered in Several Provinces of British India in 1909* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1910). This is also taken from information on KTS publications in Bhai Mohan Singh Vaid Collection at Kahn Singh Library, Punjabi University, Patiala.
- 7 This has been argued by Anshu Malhotra (2002; 2012, 159).
- 8 An example of a work that brings together the discussion of historical and fictional is Anne Murphy (2012, 134).

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4 The Conversion Loop

Gender, Identity, and Storytelling in Bhai Vir Singh's *Sundarī*

Anshu Malhotra

This chapter sets out to understand what Bhai Vir Singh (BVS) was attempting when as a young man he wrote *Sundarī*¹ (2016) touted as the first Punjabi novel. While overtly *Sundarī* narrates a simplistic story, it also has layers of complexity in its form, insofar as it has its genesis in a folksong, mixes history and genealogy/biography in its storytelling, blurring genres in an experimental piece of writing.² This chapter also tries to decode the cipher of *Sundarī*: why despite the belabored nature of the narrative, it achieved the success it did: never going out of print, this author is reading its 49th edition (2016). As a strenuous storyline that reworked in a relentless loop the plot of abduction, attempted conversion, and being saved from the ostensibly horrific possibility of conversion to Islam (but not Sikhism), it was deeply mired in the identity politics of the late nineteenth century in Punjab. In this polemical politics, undertaking dividing Hindus and Sikhs in this *nāval* was crucially energized, as also utterly confused. This is seen, first, in the genealogical additive and a parallel storyline in *Sundarī* of BVS's ancestor Kaura Mal, a "Sikh-like" Hindu, and his relations with the Hindu officer Lakhpat Rai, both serving the Mughal governor, along with, second, the semiotic charge of *Sundarī*'s life and her chasteness. *Sundarī*'s success can be compared to BVS's other novels which also centrally revolve around themes of conversion, the sexual vulnerability of women, and the inherent superiority of Sikhism; and though successful, did not achieve the canonical status of *Sundarī*. *Sundarī* has continued to be a reference point in the work of Sikh identity politics at various times (Fair 2010; Jakobsh 2020).

It is argued here that *Sundarī*'s mix of novel-writing, gender and sexual politics, and the locus of community redemption in a historical past were in tune with the larger need of elite high-caste Punjabi men to inhabit modernity, control, and organize gender politics as an aspect of globally calibrated civilizational progress, and imagine a future in which they wielded power, as has been argued for Bengal (Chatterjee 1993; Sarkar 2005). *Sundarī*, moreover, overlay this shared imaginary with an agenda of shaping Sikh separate identity (which remained fluid here), particularly articulated through shaming women for its apparently historical dilution and loss, but also, paradoxically, encumbering them with the onus of reworking

its imagined pristine character. Thus, gendered sexual politics was at the heart of *Sundarī*'s polyphonous articulations, disaggregated and analyzed here. The centrality of gender imaginings to colonial power, reformist diatribes and declamations, and nationalist reworkings of history and futurist politics has been demonstrated by generations of South Asian feminist historians (Malhotra 2002; Jakobsh 2003). More recently, a forceful argument has been made with regard to the centrality of the deviant female sexuality in all the undertakings that sort control for upper-caste men through normalizing their projections of the ideal woman in middle-class life. The intellectual labor that gathered and parsed knowledge of female sexual deviance/prostitution through various social-scientific projects also set her up against the idealized sexually contained woman, creating a hegemonic ideology that buttressed a caste-Hindu hierarchy (Mitra 2020). The similarities between Hindu and Sikh high-caste gendered ideals are pivotal to understanding the perambulations and circumlocutions of *Sundarī* that says different things all at once. Though vulnerable and victimized, Sundari never deviates from disciplining the self; her Sita-like abduction(s) never lead to crossing the Laxman-*rekhā* of purity essential for an unmarried maiden, and she remains a chaste virgin. However, it is in the tension between threatened deviancy and compulsory chastity, whoredom and its avoidance, that the woman's sexuality is harnessed for a community's powerful self-image. Simultaneously, the Muslim other is demonized, passions against him weaponized, and this hypersexualized figure ultimately emasculated. The discord between Hindu/Sikh identity is both created and confounded, leaving the matter unresolved. Let us begin by glancing at the story that unfolds in *Sundarī*.

The story(s)

The novel recounts the adventures of the Hindu Khatri girl Surasti, abducted on the eve of her *muklāvā* (ceremony of departing for the husband's house) by a Mughal officer, the *hākam*, representing arbitrary state power. The novel, situated in the eighteenth century, seeks to portray a state of unsettled times when the hold of power of Delhi Mughals had dwindled in Lahore, with Punjab becoming a battlefield among different warring groups jostling for power: remnants of the Mughal state, the Afghans, and the Khalsa (portrayed as the morally upright collective deserving power). Her Khalsa brother Balwant Singh rescues the kidnapped Surasti, after cursory and unsuccessful attempts made by her kin (father, another brother) and fiancée to free her. She thereafter decides to live with Balwant and his Khalsa fighters in Punjab's jungles, preferring to stay with the brave and ethical Khalsa soldiery rather than the kin who forsook her a tad too quickly. Surasti also decides to convert to Sikhism and becomes Sundar Kaur alias Sundari, by "taking *amrit*" the consecrated nectar in an initiation ritual. This occurs in a lyrically described ceremony, as Sundari is,

much like her brother Balwant earlier was, at heart already a Sikh, having become familiar with its rituals, scripture, and liturgy.

Indeed, Surasti's brother Balwant had turned Sikh also on his own, after keeping the company of Sikhs, though his parents viewed this occurrence as a "spoiling" of their son; indicating both a mobility between Hindu and Sikh identities, as also a measure of friction. Surasti's life henceforth is dedicated to serve the Khalsa in chores like cooking, nursing, buying groceries, and collecting fruit; with an occasional wielding of the sword to kill, to protect her person and chastity from the varied Muslim (Mughal, Turak) others who continually threaten her person. Besides her initial kidnapping, she is abducted three more times in the course of the novel and there is also a subsidiary story of the kidnapping of another Khatri/Hindu woman, who too later converts to Sikhism, along with her husband, and we get to know the couple as Dharam Kaur and Dharam Singh. The novel reprises the saga of continuous threats to Sundari, who through it all is able to preserve unblemished her chastity. This "purity" of her person is a metaphor for the ethicality of the Sikhs, their moral superiority as a community.

The novel midway also meanders into a long "historical" narrative about the conflict that the Khalsa *jathās* (or *misals* – Sikh chiefs with their bands of soldiers) are involved in with other power seekers in Punjab. Sundari and her brother are in the band of one such chief Sham Singh, who fight the Lahore state; are do-gooders looking after the interests of the all subjects (*parjā*), including ordinary Muslims; and fight guerilla warfare, conducting raids against enemies, including against the army of the inveterate Afghan invader Ahmad Shah Abdali/Durrani. The implacable adversary of the Sikhs however is Lakhpat Rai, the Hindu officer (*divān*) of the Lahore governors (Yahya Khan, Mir Mannu) who is shown to be bent upon the annihilation of the Sikhs – soldiers and civilians – an enmity he harbors because his brother Jaspat Rai was killed by the Sikhs. It is here that BVS introduces his own ancestor, Divan Kaura Mal, as another "Hindu" officer of the Lahore state, but unlike Lakhpat, a respectable man sympathetic toward the Sikhs. While the digression into history is to invoke an exemplary past of the Khalsa willingly sacrificing themselves to protect their faith and its symbols, and toward that end, the ferocious and unethical mass killings of Sikhs – *Chhotā Ghallughārā* (1746) – are described in detail, the result that BVS achieves is mixed. The explicit contrast is made between the "good" Hindu, almost-Sikh, Kaura Mal, and the "bad" Hindu Lakhpat Rai, but also, covertly between the perfect convert Sundari and a somewhat imperfect one Kaura Mal. Sundari's exemplary conversion and "Sikhness," which the novel elaborates, highlight the rather desultory *Sikhī* of BVS's ancestor Kaura Mal. Though an inspirational history is recounted – in order to reenergize the present moral collapse of a lackadaisical Sikhs – we also get to reflect on those like Kaura Mal who did not completely adhere to *Sikhī*; an undecided Hindu-Sikh who continued to serve the Mughal state in Punjab. The complex impact of these various storylines is discussed here.

The question of form: novel-writing

Novels as a genre developed in Europe around the conventions of realism and attempted to mirror life, presenting recognizable spaces, mundane activities, and linear time. Mimesis of such writing was initially difficult in India, with its literary genres that emphasized the unexpected, the miraculous, the awe-inspiring, and the episodic. As Meenakshi Mukherjee has shown, in almost all regions in India, early novel-writing carried older storytelling traditions (Mukherjee 1994). It is not that the novel did not have what Amitav Ghosh has called the “scaffolding of exceptional moments” but that it concealed these with “fillers,” its “rhetoric of the everyday,” of regular, modern bourgeois life (Ghosh 2016: 20–34).³ The early novels in India “groped for form” (Dalmia 2017: 11). The later “cultural authority” of the novel as a genre, which captured the multiple nuances of a modernizing middle class, or the struggles of the rural peasant, to the extent that the novel became a “site to which people resorted for information regarding matters of emotional life” was a long time away at the turn of the nineteenth century (Ibid: 4). There was little space here for individual characters’ quests for self and subjectivity, or the ability to portray layered minutiae, meaning, and negotiation in gender relationships. In short, the reality of Indian life, with its social hierarchies, emphasis on community and caste obligations, and early marriage, was not conducive to the novel’s terrain (Mukherjee 1994: 3–18). Though more sophisticated novels emerged later, the nineteenth-century novels, sometime with their “in-betweenness” and hybrid forms, as with *Sundarī*, had little interest in fillers and remained episodic (Blackburn and Dalmia 2004: 6). However, we need to understand what they wished to achieve.

Women, as markers of a culture’s progress or state of decline, as instruments of depicting an intended improvement or an emulative past, or as nodal for a nationalist revival, were the pivot around which many early novels were written. Often carrying a reformist mien, these novels could take up questions like compulsory widowhood and its faults, or the need for educating women, what Mukherjee calls “the novel of purpose” (Mukherjee: 19–37). While domesticity could encompass and exhaust the whole of women’s lives, many novels eschewed placing women in domestic settings, as that left little room for any degree of independent action on their part. The successful novels that did depict domestic situations, among them Nazir Ahmad’s 1869 novel *Mirāt al-Arūs* (*Bride’s Mirror*) or Gauri Dutt’s *Devrānī Jethānī kī Kahānī* (*The Story of Sisters-in-Law*, 1870), often presented the contrasting good woman/bad woman syndrome, a trope that had folkloric roots (Mukherjee 1994: 24; Devji 2011; Naim 2011). More feasible for early novelists was to show what Tanika Sarkar has called the “unfettered woman,” displacing women from domestic situations and depicting them as either widows or courtesans, deploying their “unharnessed sexual energy,” to use Mukherjee’s words, for reformist or

nationalist causes (Mukherjee 1994: 70; Sarkar 2005: 146). *Sundarī* falls within this category of purposive didacticism. In BVS's portrayal of this virgin maiden and her chastity, her purity and her innocence become the specular image of the idealized Khalsa. Significantly, Sundari is neither a widow, nor a prostitute – terms that are used interchangeably in north Indian languages – but an unmarried, single, sister-like, woman, for her purity had a figurative function in establishing Khalsa superiority. It was only in the hands of an exceptionally skilled novelist like Bankim Chandra that complex explorations of women's sexuality, passions, and needs, as also a critique of Hindu domesticity, were examined (Sarkar 2005: 135–62). None of BVS's novels attempt such psychological examinations of women's interiorities.

There is little work that explores the early consumption of European novels in India – the particular pleasures, desires, and imaginations these let loose, bourgeois aspirational life they invited the reader to step into, the imagining of the self as a modern subject (Appadurai 1996: 3). Munshi Ram's (Swami Shraddhanand, b. 1856) autobiography, the famous Punjabi Arya Samaji of the gurukul wing, artfully presents his roguish youth advancing toward enlightenment as he met the Arya Samaj's founder, Dayanand Sarasvati, and came to devote his life to the Samaj. He reveals his secret and guilty pleasure as a youth in reading novels late into the night instead of studying school books, and without the knowledge of his father. Saliently, Munshi Ram links his reading of Walter Scott novels to the emergence of new aspirations around conjugal life, love, and passion. He casts himself in the role of the “knight errant” and his future wife as the “distressed lady,” his “lady love.” So, his disappointment when he marries, for his wife was still a child, too young to indulge his fantasies. However, his disappointment is offset by his resolve to “educate” her (Shraddhanand 1924: 47, 56). Both of Munshi Ram's stances, new expectations from emerging pressures for monogamous marriages and the desire for an educated partner to whom the husband could be the teacher/guru, are an aspect of new imaginings of middle-class private life that put the churning gender relations at the heart of the modernist project, as it does in *Sundarī*, but not through marriage or education (Kaviraj 2004; Walsh 2004). The image of the husband guru/god, or an elderly male ascetic-like guru, was explored by BVS in other writings, in his tracts on women's reform, and in his epical *Rāṇā Sūrāt Singh* (Malhotra 2002; Singh 2013). In *Sundarī*, BVS casts Sundari as the guru, in her exemplary pure/virginal life, and her fervent speech-making on her death-bed. This is seen by some scholars as Sundari embodying Sikh ideals, an interpretation that discounts the gender and identity politics of the time (Singh 1993).

In *Sundarī*, BVS is the omnipresent author, overtly addressing his readers when tying the threads of his story together. Significantly, BVS assumes women as the readers of his novels and addresses them directly: “O the *Sikhnīs* of today...living in comfort!” (*Sundarī*: 102).

If women could read reformist literature aimed at them, they could read other genres too, the inherently destabilizing impact of education that reformers like BVS advocated but also hedged about by attempting to control what women read. BVS harangues women against reading what he sees as prurient literature of Punjabi romantic *qisse* and is careful to make his novelistic ventures moralistic. The fear that novels threatened the morals of the young impressionable women, and gave rise to uncontrollable desires, was widespread, though Munshi Ram's case shows that men were more likely to succumb to new and nebulous temptations. The novel's self-immersive delights were seen to go against the grain of frugal living and social engagement, crucial to new imaginations of Punjabi middle-class life (Malhotra 2005). However, the novelistic form was attractive for men like BVS as it offered an unparalleled opportunity to explicate life and history as unfolding ethical lessons, moralize women, and reorganize social roles.

Invoking history

To escape the reality of the colonial present, many novelists took refuge in writing of a glorious historical past. Historical fiction allowed lending the past the qualities that one wished to possess in the present. Bengali novelists began writing of Maratha or Rajput history, as a time of Hindu valor and power, eulogizing anti-Mughal/Muslim conflict (Mukherjee 1994: 41–58). The opacity of the past bestowed it with a useful plasticity. Many also placed their heroines in this fictive past, endowing women with activism and agency, controlled by the male author, as in some of Bankim's historical novels (Ibid; Sarkar 2005: 163–90). Many Bengali novels were translated into Hindi, initiated at the behest of the doyen of new Hindi literature Bhartendu Harishchandra, and it is possible that Punjabi litterateurs had access to them or there were Punjabi translations in the market (Mukherjee 1994: 43). In BVS's novels, the mix of glorious history, when the Sikhs were fighting the Mughal power in the eighteenth century, and an active heroine as energizing men through her valor as her vulnerability, was crucial. Writing in this mode, then, BVS was in sync with the literary trends in India. Belonging as BVS did to a family devoted to literary pursuits, his access and heuristic ability with Sikh literature, gave him a unique opportunity to dexterously deploy history in his novels. The use of history and historical texts in *Sundarī* is salient.

The interspersing of fiction and history in *Sundarī*, Anne Murphy has discussed as the writing of *imaginary history*: of the Khalsa, the nation, and of the people as *parjā* (Murphy 2012b: 134–45). This historical quest was an eminently modern project, the desire to possess a past that worked in the grooves of linear temporality, the relentless forward movement of time unleashed by the colonizers, ridiculing the colonized peoples' apparently deficient understanding of historicized time. The recourse to history (*tavārikh*) and the historical (*itihāsik*) is insistently made in *Sundarī*,

particularly history as available in the written form. Thus, we have the multitudinous quotations from Rattan Singh Bhangu's *Prāchīn Pañth Prakāśh* (1841) in the second half of the novel. Murphy has also shown Bhangu's history as written in concert and engagement with the British efforts to understand the Sikhs and their political antecedents, as also a response to the need to write history. Bhangu's account of an ideal Khalsa polity, written in contention with other accounts of Punjabi pasts, matched BVS's need to show this time as an ideal one when ostensibly the principles of Khalsa Sikhism inspired Sikhs (Murphy 2012b: 121–2). The desire to recoup a Sikh/Khalsa history was very strong, a history of Sikh suffering and sacrifice. BVS worked with the notion that every community ought to retrieve its own history, for only then they could make a claim to the future. It was incumbent upon all Sikhs to remember their history, indeed to construct it, and *Sundarī* was in part BVS's attempt toward this self-appointed task.

The eighteenth century presented BVS with a time when the era of the gurus had closed with the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708, followed by a period of turbulence in Punjab. It was an age marked by the decline of the local Mughal power, seen, for instance, in the short-lived but deadly depredations of Banda Bahadur, the *bairāgī* follower of the tenth guru, against the Mughal power; of Persian and multiple Afghan invasions; of restive Rajputs of the Himalayan foothills; and the roving Khalsa bands (Dhavan 2011). It was the Khalsa, with their fighting prowess, their doctrines of Guru Granth and Panth, and the collective strength in the *guru-mattā* (the collective will of Sikh leaders) that eventually triumphed (Oberoi 1996). Here was ample opportunity to display heroism, martyrdom emerging as a major theme in Sabha writings (Fenech 2002). The focus on the *chhotā ghallughārā* (the small massacre) as a historical event that the novel unfolds, explicated through Bhangu's account, is used to galvanize the contemporary Sikhs to remember the past of their martyred co-religionists. Through the intermingling of real characters from history – Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Jassa Singh Ramgarhia, “*shahīd*” (martyr) Deep Singh – with fictional ones, BVS gives a glimpse of the past as a palpable reality and urges his readers to believe the make-believe. Paradoxically, the deliberate mixing of fact and fiction in *Sundarī* can also be read as the colonized hitting back at the colonizers, refusing the binary of “primitiveness” and “history,” and “mobilizing the practices of *kalpanā*” (imagination) to insist on mythicized storytelling (Banerjee 2005).

Similarly, the emphasis throughout the novel on the miraculous transformation of a person when converted to Sikhism, or the uncommon grit of Sikhs, regularly acknowledged by their enemies – “what clay are these beloved Sikhs chiseled from” – in comparison to those of other religions and ethnicities is remarkable and evocative of a cosmos where such magical transformations established moral and religious superiority (*Sundarī*: 59). Thus, the earlier mentioned Hindu Khatri on becoming the Sikh Dharam Singh is alchemized beyond recognition.

*ih Khatrī pahliān toñ māmūlī nirbal te julūjulū karan vālā pīlā bhuk
shihariyā sī...fer amrit chhak ke dādā takrā te balī ho gayā...*

this Khatri was earlier an ordinary weak, slow and a very pallid towns-
man...then upon tasting nectar he became really powerful and strong....
(*Sundarī*: 45)

Though supposedly with the loss of belief in the magical by the end of the nineteenth century and the advent of rational mentality, the intervention of the supernatural in human life was to have ceased; this instantaneous metamorphosis is nothing short of miraculous. Reminiscent of the *janam-sākhīs* (stories on the life of the first guru) where miracles worked toward establishing the religious heft of a holy personage, what is invoked here is that mythical moment of the formation of Khalsa itself in 1699, metaphorically speaking when “sparrows became hawks,” and when the tenth guru was able to instill in his flock apparently bottomless bravura (Dhavan 2011: 69). The narrator tells us that on taking the initiating nectar and after bathing in the pool at Amritsar, the Sikhs are transformed – their hearts become stronger than steel and harder than stone (*Sundarī*: 69).

Among the multiple historical imaginaries at work in *Sundarī*, Murphy argues, was one that propelled the making of the nation (*desh*), a community that was larger than the Khalsa itself, though they may act as its sovereigns and guarantors of the rights of the people. She further notes that though sometimes sectarian, this imagination was inclusive of the Muslims, who were presented as part of the *parjā*, and who were equally horrified at the cruelties perpetrated by the Muslim rulers (Murphy 2012b: 138–45). A similar strategy of including the ordinary Muslims while enacting an anti-Muslim provocation has been shown in the context of the contemporary celebrations of Fateh-Diwas by the Sikh community in Delhi (Singh, 2020). I briefly refer to two issues with reference to the sectarian imagination that was, in my reading, nodal in the novel, to point out how BVS’s history-writing aligned with the larger Indian historical imagination that was emerging in the colonial period; and also, to show that at least in geographical and topographical terms, the question of territoriality, the *desh* referred to was Punjab over which the Khalsa *jathās* roamed. Thus, an expansive and inclusive imagination was as often as not hemmed in by a more exclusive one, an instance of the heteroglossia in *Sundarī*.

Partha Chatterjee, studying the various histories of India being produced in Bengal in the nineteenth century, argues that the Indians’ claim to history and nation accepted European-inspired tripartite division of history into the ancient, medieval, and modern periods, glorifying the ancient and producing the medieval as “Muslim” with all the anti-Islam biases of the enlightenment. Recently, Manan Asif has made a similar point about how such history-writing lost the capacious and inclusive idea of Hindustan, inventing India in its stead, through a new colonial imaginary (Asif 2020). The Muslim in this imagination appeared as fanatical and bigoted.

Chatterjee notes that the criterion for inclusion in the nation was that of historical origin and the Muslims were on that count excluded as their origin was traced to Muhammad and Arabia (Chatterjee 1993). The Muslims were produced in *Sundarī* in an analogous way despite the *parjā* including ordinary Muslims. BVS can be said to have further carried the anti-Muslim prejudices of some of the Sikh literature of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, as this literature constructed the Khalsa's political and social being, at least partially, as antagonistic toward the Muslims, as seen in some *Rahitnāmās* (McLeod 2003).

BVS depicts the Mughal/Muslim rulers as cruel, dissolute, hypersexualized, and ungrateful. While cruelty is not exclusively their quality, Lakhpat Rai is also cruel; however, he is so as a minion of the rulers, who are shown as defilers of Hindu/Sikh women's purity, and the novel insinuates a routine kidnapping of Hindu women. The trope of abduction, in the novel, is habitually practiced by concupiscent Muslim men, who seize Hindu women, even though they have many women in their seraglios. Interestingly, BVS excludes the great Mughals, those who ruled from Delhi, from such a portrayal, indicting the smaller officers in Punjab as perpetrating such injustices. No Hindu woman, the author suggests, was free from the lustful gaze of these lesser rulers:

Hindu parents...kept their daughter and daughters-in-law like confined prisoners because a pretty woman, a beautiful house, wealth and property was difficult to be found with a Hindu.

(*Sundarī*: 2)

The counterparts of the depraved Muslims/Mughals were cowardly Hindus, and the Sikhs were shown as brave protectors of Hindus.

I will pick up the question of Muslims as bigoted and ungrateful later when I discuss the theme of abduction. However, it is worth noting that communities were differentiated and recognized in the novel by their distinctive religio-cultural markers. For the Muslims, this marker was crucially their language, besides their harems, food, and dress. BVS depicts even ordinary Muslims speaking Farsi, the high prestige cosmopolitan language of the elite, e.g., the language of Ranjit Singh's court. The women in the *navāb's* house where Dharam Kaur is kept incarcerated speak Farsi (*Sundarī*: 36). When the Sikh spy Bijla Singh disguises himself as a Muslim *faqīr* in order to locate Sundari after another episode of her kidnapping, he makes his masquerade authentic by singing in Arabic (!) and Farsi, besides Punjabi:

kadī Arabī vich kuj gauṇḍā hai, kadī Fārsī vich, kadī Hīr Rānjhe de ṭappe, kade Bābā Nānak de salok

sometimes he sings in Arabic, sometimes in Farsi, sometimes the verses of Hir and Ranjha, and at others the couplets of Baba Nanak.

(*Sundarī*: 63)

And finally, when Sundari, a second time finds an injured Muslim Pathan (she has already earlier nursed one wounded Muslim soldier to health, only to have him kidnap her later), the one who will inflict a wound on her when he finds out that she is not a Muslim, he too speaks to her in Farsi to find out if she is Muslim: “he started throwing around these Farsi phrases... are you a Muslim, are you of the faith?” (*Sundarī*: 101). Persian/Farsi and Arabic emerge as languages not of the educated elite as such, but as distinctive Muslim attributes, not on the basis of who actually spoke a particular language but on the strength of Islam’s place of origin.

What about the imagination of the *desh*? The manner in which *desh* is presented by BVS evokes the incipient idea of the nation. However, the nation envisaged, and affectively invested in, is Punjab. The idea of the nation, and the one that legitimizes the sovereignty of the Khalsa, is based on the promise of good governance, where the Khalsa dispense justice to all, Hindus and Muslims, and fight for the welfare of the people: “Sikhs fight for the good of the people” (*Sundarī*: 77). This nation-in-the-making melds at times with a territoriality that evokes a larger Indian entity – *bhārat bhūmī* – but on investigation refers in fact to the Punjab on which the Khalsa can claim to rule (*Sundarī*: 86). The localities and topography of a larger Punjab, without defined borders, are referenced repeatedly. Besides the cities of Lahore, Amritsar, and Multan, specific locales of Punjab are evoked – *Mājihā* (central Punjab), *Mālwā* (South-East Punjab), and *Doābā* (Jalandhar area). Punjab’s rivers, lakes, forests, and mountains are indexed – Ravi, Beasa, and Satluj rivers are mentioned; the forest of Kahnuwan, and its lake; and places in Punjab hills – Basoli, Kathua are mentioned, along with many references to Punjab itself. What one sees here is the contingent and protean notion of nation based on the consent of people, regional in its territorial evocations, but also parallel to and segueing into a larger India of Indic inheritance. The nation, if it was sometimes imagined as various communities coming together after protecting their specific interests, what Gyanendra Pandey showed as an imaginary of Hindus+Muslims+Christians, etc., then here was a Sikh/Khalsa version of the nation with an appeal to the peoples of Punjab (Pandey 1990).

Genealogical stories

In *Sundarī*’s mix of fiction and history, one may add another ingredient – a tangential referencing of genealogy, with an impulse to chisel out and explore, the making of a modern Sikh, BVS himself. What is the purchase that the character of Kaura Mal, BVS’s ancestor, brings to the tale? If at one level the story relates the many cruelties perpetrated by the rogue officer Lakhpat Rai, in fighting whom the Sikhs emerge more committed to their religion and identity, the need for the “partial” Sikh Kaura Mal seems dubious. He is, of course, a counterfoil to Lakhu, the bad Hindu, Kaura Mal representing the good Hindu/ almost Sikh, both serving the Mughal state of Lahore.

In the novel, the guileful Kaura Mal, the secret admirer of the Sikhs, is shown twice to explicitly help the Sikhs, hiding it from the rulers he serves. He supplies Sikhs with grains, when their lack of food would have starved them out (and brought victory to those he served). A second time he works toward avoiding a clash between the rulers and the Sikhs at Ram Rauni, and instead persuading them to focus on ousting the invading Afghans by pooling resources (*Sundarī*: 78–82, 93–4). It is in the contrasting deaths of Lakhpāt and Kaura Mal that BVS overtly compares the two: Lakhpāt Rai dies in disfavor, with Kaura Mal handing him over to the Sikhs to wreak their vengeance on him; and Kaura Mal dies in a battle after having been honored by the rulers he served: “Mannu bestowed Divan Kaura Mal with the title of Maharaja and the rule over Multan and the whole of southern Punjab came under his control” (*Sundarī*: 92–6, 97). BVS makes their oppositional attitudes toward the Sikhs the reason for their contrasting fates: “he was rewarded so well for serving the Sikhs and Lakhpāt reaped the bad fruit for making enemies of them” (*Sundarī*: 97). However, the irony of having “served” both the Sikhs and the Mughals is lost on BVS, who are otherwise presented as enemies. He puts the sentences that highlight both the “services” in the same paragraph; when the novel works toward legitimizing the Sikh ambitions and delegitimizing the Mughals’ rule.

Let us now draw a comparison between Sundarī and Kaura Mal, which is not explicit in the novel, but one that yields interesting insights. Sundarī is the ideal Sikh woman, well versed in the scriptures, domestic at most times, willing to use violence when required, imbued with the spirit, tradition, humility, and the discipline of a *Singhī* (Khalsa woman). Note, for instance, her idealized conversion to Sikhism as her idealized death, both accomplished in a lyrical setting in the jungles of Punjab, amidst chanting from Guru Granth, a setting that the author compares to heaven (*baikunth*). She dies after addressing the gathering on the ideal behavior behooving Sikh women and men. This Hindu Surasti, BVS suggests, has become the perfect Sikh, Sundarī.

Kaura Mal, however, continues to inhabit an undecided space between a Hindu and a Sikh, an officer of the state, and duplicitously serving the interests of the Sikhs, Gurpreet Bal refers to Kaura Mal as Machiavellian (Bal 2006). At one point in the novel when Sikhs are shown to be gathering at Harmandir in Amritsar to celebrate *Gurpūrab*, along with women and children, Kaura Mal and his colleague Surat Singh are depicted as trying to dissuade Lakhpāt Rai from the mass murders of the Sikhs he’s planning. Among the arguments they place before him is the kinship between the Hindus and the Sikhs, in which they not only refer to themselves as Hindus, but also the Sikhs as such: “These Sikhs are our own arms, our limbs; to make them enemies is to strike your own feet with an axe. Being Hindus if we get Hindus killed then destruction is at hand” (*Sundarī*: 57).

BVS, then, portrays Kaura Mal to be a friend of the Sikhs, acknowledged by the Sikhs themselves. Thus, Kapoor Singh says of Kaura Mal: “This

brave man is a real friend, he always helps in our difficult time, he's a great benefactor of the Khalsa, and despite holding such a high rank with the enemies, he loves us like a person loves life" (*Sundarī*: 78). Thereafter, BVS makes declarations of Kaura Mal being a Sikh, or Sikh-like, and moves toward incorporating him within Sikhism:

Kaurā Mal Gurū kā Sikh hai, khulāsā Sikh, sahajdhārī Sikh. Jis bane vich rahindā hai is vich rahike hī pañth nuñ aukhe velyāñ te pukardā hai, tade tāñ pañth vich is nuñ hun 'Miṭhā Mal' sad de ne

Kaura Mal is a Sikh of the Guru, openly Sikh, *sahajdhārī* Sikh. The garb in which he lives, within it he serves the *pañth* in its difficult times, that is why within the *pañth* he is now called Mitha Mal.

(*Sundarī*: 79)

The bitter (*kaurā*) person (as he serves the enemy) has been transformed into a sweet (*miṭhā*) man as he renders crucial service to the Sikhs.

The semantic and semiotic move that we see in the changing description of Kaura Mal opens up a number of issues. The first is regarding the ambivalence between Hindu and Sikh identities. Despite a scholarly consensus that the Singh Sabha definitively toted up the hallmarks of who a Sikh is, their ideologues, whether BVS or Ditt Singh before him, continued to display ambiguities that had the potential to undermine their larger agendas of sharpening distinctive identity (Malhotra 2017: 201–36). As Harjot Oberoi noted, “Sikh notions of time, space, corporeality, holiness, mythology, kinship, societal distinctions, purity and pollution, gender, sexuality and commensality were firmly rooted in Indic cultural thinking” (Oberoi: 1996). The Khalsa in the eighteenth century were becoming the dominant way of being Sikh, with their *rahit* (the Khalsa conduct codes), distinctive bodily symbols and growing political clout. However, other forms of inhabiting Sikhness, including the *sahajdhārī* way, persisted. When BVS writes of Kaura Mal as *khulāsā* Sikh, did he mean someone living openly as a Sikh, or did he mean a liberal Sikh? Did the word *khulāsā* (disclosure), ambiguous in its import, indicate open adhering to *Sikhī*? Considering that BVS followed up by calling Kaura Mal a *sahajdhārī* Sikh, he could well mean that he was a liberal, non-Khalsa Sikh, or alternatively that he was “gradually” becoming a Sikh? The gradualist interpretation was promoted by the Singh Sabha; *sahajdhārī*'s earlier connotations implied being a Sikh other than Khalsa, or one who strives for the ineffable state of bliss (*sahaj*) through *nām simraṇ*, or chanting god/guru's name, and following Sikh teachings. That BVS in this novel at various times uses terms like Sikh, Khalsa, *Singhī*, *Singhī*, to describe Sikhs, and often Sikh and Khalsa interchangeably, adds to the ambivalence of the references.

The portrayal of Kaura Mal, I suggest, is BVS's investigation and representation of his ancestry. Mal, a foil to the malicious Lakhpat, underlines

that a good Hindu is required to make a Sikh (including Sundari, Balwant, Dharam Kaur, and Singh). The overarching purpose of the novel was to inspire BVS's contemporaries with the sacrifices of the eighteenth-century Khalsa, by showing their bravery and uncompromising attachment to their religious insignia. Toward this endeavor, Kaura Mal is a failure. He was brave and sympathetic to the Sikhs, but ultimately his loyalty and personal advance lay with serving the Mughal state. Mal's lackluster *Sikhī*, insofar as he is duplicitous, and does not display Khalsa emblems on his person, distracts from BVS's purpose rather than attract people to the Khalsa persona.

One may suggest that by insinuating Kaura Mal into the novel, BVS was interpreting his past. Mal was in familial terms a celebrated figure who achieved fame in his lifetime. He became the vice-governor of Multan under Mir Mannu and received the title of Maharaja Bahadur. His name was inscribed on the Delhi-Gate of Lahore. He had the Bal-Lila Gurdvara built at Nankana Sahib and had a fort, Garh-Maharaja, constructed at his native place near Shorkot, Jhang, Punjab (Singh 1972; 1991). Though BVS does not call him his ancestor in the novel, he undoubtedly takes pride in Mal's achievements, mentioning his service in the Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar, getting the pond in the temple cleaned and filled with water (*Sundarī*: 97). With a history of serving the state, this Chugh Arora ancestor of BVS fit into the service gentry, the kind of ancestry that was applauded in upper-caste family histories and genealogical charts, like the one penned by Ganesh Das Badhera in *Chār Bāgh-i-Panjāb* (Grewal and Banga 1975). This was also the kind of lineage that in historical records demonstrates resistance to Khalsa tenets, even within Sikhism's fold, i.e., showed a preference for the *sahajdhārī* way (Oberoi 1996; Deol 2001). Kaura Mal also served a state that the Khalsa were fighting, even if he occasionally sympathized with them. He remained a non-Sikh, and it has been noted that BVS's grandfather Kahn Singh was the first Sikh in the family (Singh 2004; 1972). The historical reasons for accepting Sikhism were intellectual or emotional attraction, rather than any apocalyptic reasons as highlighted in the recuperation of eighteenth-century history in the late nineteenth century.

In the Singh Sabha-inspired identity politics, BVS's angst over this "Hindu" ancestor, sympathetic to the Sikhs, but serving the Mughal state, comes across sharply at one instance in the novel. Trying to stop a woman and her child proceeding toward the Harmandir Sahib, because Lakhpat would kill them, Kaura Mal and Surat Singh are chastened by the woman's words: "if you love Sikhs as much as your attitude at this moment shows, then fight Lakhpat and stop him from committing this sin. If there is a political obstacle in this, then send a word to any of the Khalsa bands in the forest...This talk pierced the two like an arrow" (*Sundarī*: 61). The piercing of Kaura Mal's, or rather BVS's heart acknowledged the reality of the time that Kaura Mal did not side with the Khalsa, and in fact witnessed the murderous attack on the Sikhs. A cherished ancestor, who fit in every manner the traditional ways in which ancestors received encomiums, became in the

context of identity politics in the colonial public sphere someone whose loyalties had to be explained, and whose siding with the state had to be compensated for by exaggerated statements of his *Sikhī*. In the genealogical story that BVS tells in *Sundarī*, he constructs a “biomythography” that sweetened the past of an ancestor, developing a stance of his Sikhness, in order to fit in with needs of the present (Smith and Watson 2010: 263, 271). One may suggest that BVS’s constructed subjectivity required such tinkering; fiddling with the past, in fact, being the task of traditional genealogies. Here, this genealogical work is attempted in the new prose medium of the modernistic novel.

Abduction, conversion, chastity, and religious identity

Kaura Mal is depicted as an almost convert to Sikhism. In *Sundarī*, the scenarios of religious conversion, whether successful, failed, threatened, legitimate, illegitimate, or pseudo-historical, are set up repetitiously. Conversion, in various permutations, plays out in a loop in the novel. In this section, I will discuss the obsessional reprising of this theme and try and understand its varied manifestations. Significantly, the discourse on conversion was preceded by an act of abduction of a woman. This links BVS’s *Sundarī* to a mythological and literary imagination in India that creates a theater of anxieties, where women’s sexual vulnerability, abduction, and a test of chastity are played out in emotional melodrama. The classical example is of Sita in the epic Ramayana; and a local Punjabi case is of the nineteenth-century Lahore courtesan Piro, who too in her life-story *Ik Sau Saṭh Kāfiān* dramatizes the cultural alchemy of abduction, threat of (re)conversion, and rescue/escape (Malhotra 2017: 55–91). Such portrayals also anticipate the future acts of abduction, or insinuations of the same, during periods of communal hostility in India. The kidnapping of women (or such an accusation) and the “other” religion’s men’s rapaciousness (read Muslim), came to be played out in situations of riots and pogroms at various times in Indian history: whether colonial India, during India’s Partition, in post-colonial India, or the charges of “love-*jihād*” today (Datta 1999; Gupta 2016). Further, what made conversion acceptable in the novel (to Sikhism), and what not (to Islam), was because the Muslims (Mughals/*Turaks*) as a community (*qaum*) were portrayed as not indigenous, and therefore not belonging. BVS can be said to have participated fully in constructing the myth of Muslim rapacity. Surasti/Sundarī’s kidnapping, enacted four times in the novel, or the Khatri woman Dharam Kaur’s abduction, adds to this mythmaking.

Muslim/Mughal rulers in the novel are shown to be single-minded in their zeal to convert, particularly women into Islam, though historical/storied narratives of note are about men, with the ninth guru Tegh Bahadur providing a salient example of a failed attempt at conversion (Murphy 2012a). The enactment of conversion, or its refusal, in fractious situations is presented in Punjabi literary imagination as a theatrical public act where

the display and discussion of religious insignia become all-important, for example, Tegh Bahadur protecting the *tilak* (forehead mark) and *janeyū* (sacred thread) of Kashmiri Brahmins. Alternatively, the threat of breaching religious taboos is highlighted, for instance, concerning food consumption, as when Piro alleges that the mullahs question her on consuming pork/pig, making a break with Islam (Malhotra 2017: 95–106). Of course, by mentioning the spectacular martyrdom of Mani Singh in the novel, BVS does evoke this inspirational example of protecting the Sikh faith.⁴ However, the concern of the novel revolves around threats to its women characters.

Early in the narrative BVS portrays the illegitimacy of the Muslim attempt to convert Surasti and Balwant to Islam by focusing on the symbols of religion under threat at a public place of a mosque. Balwant's Khalsa emblems – his drawers (*kachhehrā*), unshorn hair (*kes*), and turban (*pag*) – are shown to be dirty and unkempt because of his incarceration, which was an insult to his religion. Surasti is depicted covered in a veil (*burkhā*), a marker of Muslim women, highlighting its impropriety on her person. Balwant prevents the public shaving of his hair through his vigorous shake of head, an indignant power he acquires to prevent humiliation of his religion. Then again, Surasti preserves her brother's hair by her dramatic discarding of the offending veil, and throwing the barber down, before the Sikhs come to their fortuitous rescue (*Sundarī*: 16–7).

Sometimes, Hindu/Sikh women's putative conversion to Islam is presented in a less public way. Dharam Kaur feels that she loses her religion by being force-fed “Muslim food,” specifically the gravy of (forbidden?) flesh (*mās dī tarī*) (*Sundarī*: 37–8). At another instance, a young woman whose husband has been killed by the rulers is to be converted to Islam through marriage (*nikāh*) (*Sundarī*: 23). Sometimes, the term *mahilī varnā*, entering the palace/harem, is used to show women's religious and sexual violation (*Sundarī*: 32). Here, the fear of sexual violation is made explicit, though oftentimes the breaching of food taboos is also a euphemism for sexual violation.

In the novel, chastity emerges as an issue of constant concern as it is repeatedly threatened. So, what does chastity signify? In my reading, the question of chastity works on different registers. The ethnographic and historical literature on Punjab shows that a girl's chastity has to be preserved and vigilance over her sexuality is severe (Hershman 1977; Malhotra 2002: 76–7). For controlling a woman's sexuality ensures the legitimacy of progeny and is the basis of kinship, marriage, and social organization. Very early in her life, Paul Hershman noted, a girl is made to feel “shame” in her genitals, as against a playful attitude of mothers toward a son's genitals. The sense of honor invested in preserving virginity and in chaste behavior even today remains an important definer of Punjabi daughterhood (Jakobsh and Nesbitt 2010: 8). The concern with a wife's chastity is equally important and Punjabi society celebrates a *pativratā* (a devoted wife) woman as the ideal. As I have argued elsewhere, this ideal was renewed in the period under discussion to be upheld by Hindu and Sikh women (Malhotra 2002).

BVS, through his many tracts on the subject, and in his celebrated *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh*, reinvests in this cultural ideal, making it the most laudatory behavior for women.

In the novel, the investment in chastity appears primarily a concern of Hindu and Sikh women, creating an affinity between their cultural practices. This also introduces an interesting ambiguity and equivalence in their religious identities. One example of this concern in the novel is with regard to the Khatri woman/Dharam Kaur, whose purity as a Hindu and later Sikh woman must be ensured. When she is in the captivity of her Muslim abductors, she prays for the saving of her honor through invocation of lord Krishna by Draupadi in the epic Mahabharata, when she utters, *jaise rākḥī Draupadī dī lāj* (as you protected Draupadi's honor). Indeed, Sundari, in the Sikh party that goes to rescue Dharam Kaur (appropriating Krishna's role), asks her euphemistically if she has lost her chastity? And she is reassured with the words:

nahīn jī main sheel dharam vich driṛ hān

No, I am firm in my wifely virtue.

(*Sundarī*: 37)

Sundari's spotless chastity, saliently, becomes a metaphor for the purity of the Sikh/Khalsa itself.

Significantly, in the novel, men, including the Khalsa fighters, must indulge in realpolitik in order to acquire or retain power. Political acuity propels them toward practicing subterfuge, as when spies like Bijla Singh infiltrate enemy camp in order to become privy to their strategies. At two instances, Sikh spies disguise as Muslim men to inveigle information regarding Sundari. Early in the novel, Hari Singh "dresses" as a Mughal in order to locate the whereabouts of the captured Surasti and Balwant. Later, Bijla "attires" himself as a Muslim *faqīr* in order to figure out where the once again abducted Sundari is? In this scenario of changeable identities, the question that arises is how "essential" are religious identities? To put it another way, confused significations of religious identities throw to doubt the idea of their immutability, even for Sikhs, who are otherwise shown to defend their religious identity ferociously. The point that Jean Howard makes with regard to mutable gender identities in Shakespeare's comedic drama, where characters resort to cross-dressing to not just create piquant situations, but also undermine the notion of fundamental gender differences, can be applied here in relation to religious identity of Sikhs and Muslims (Howard 1988).

My contention is that Sundari's chastity, though introduced in the first chapter in the familiar familial milieu that ethnographers of Punjab have underlined, fulfills a larger purpose in the novel. It represents both the affirmation and recouping of Sikh/Khalsa purity. When Sikh men are mired in realpolitik, it is Sundari's virginal innocence that represents Sikh

righteousness. Her inability to see suffering, even among enemies, who routinely betray her: in the first instance, the wounded Mughal soldier she nurses to health ends up kidnapping her so she may marry his superior, her original abductor; and a second time the dying soldier she revives ends up striking her with a sword on learning that she is not a Muslim (*Sundarī*: 101). In *Sundarī*, the traditional social investment in a woman's chastity, common to all the religious communities of Punjab, is developed into a statement of the honor of the Sikh community. So BVS calls her *dharam dā sūraj* (the sun of religion/morality), and has another character referring to her as:

tere vargiyān dharmī istriān de sat pichhe hī pañth hai

the Panth exists because of the goodness/chastity of religious women like you.

(*Sundarī*: 98, 115)

The importance of religious fervor as dependent on such women is indexed by BVS also through *Sundarī*'s statement:

a woman's heart is soft like wax but also hard as stone, and when the fervor of righteousness/religion enters her heart then she becomes so determined that no one can shake her (belief).

(*Sundarī*: 26)

It may be observed that the loaded word *dharam* is used multitudinously in the novel and can loosely be translated as morals/religion. It is the qualifying word used in tandem with it that sharpens out its meaning – Sikh *dharam* (Sikh religious community); *patibrat dharam* (husbandly duty); *qaumī dharam* (duty toward religious race/community); Hindu *dharam* (Hindu religion), and the like. In the accumulation of meanings of the word *dharam*, *sat* (true/good/chaste) *dharam* and Sikh *dharam* work through *Sundarī* to reflect on each other.

And so BVS contrasts *Sundarī* to his contemporary Sikh women, who are in his estimation remiss in their religious observations. Fidelity to the re-defined Sikh religion implicitly becomes similar to loyalty to one's husband, a devotion that is focused, expressed toward one religion/man. Additionally, women must assume responsibility of not only reforming themselves, following *Sundarī*, but also their husbands and sons. Thus, men's laxness must be compensated by women's steadfastness. The prominent disquisition in the novel on which a number of scholars have commented that iterates this point is the following (Bal 2006; Fair 2010):

he aj kal diān sone vich pīlyān hoke sukh nāl baithio singhniyo...sikh qaum dā ghātā tuhāde hī bathī ho rihā hai...sikh dharam toñ gāfal ho ke dūje dharam vich ruldiān ho....

O Singh women of today loaded with gold and living in comfort... the decline of the Sikh community is at your hands...negligent of Sikh religion you stray into other religions, turning your face away from the true guru you teach your children of other religions...[they will be] Sikhs from their heads, Brahmans from their necks and Muslims from the waist down...leaving your living god (viz. husband) you feed snakes, and sacrificing the incomparable god who is beyond birth and death you tread the path of hell, and guide your husbands and sons towards the same path.

(*Sundarī*: 102–3)

This auctorial speech that ridicules religious hybridity can, in effect, also be viewed as the process of conversion of Sikh women to the re-defined *Sikhī*. Sikh women are simultaneously differentiated from Hindu women; their *shastrās* treat them like *shudrās*, readers are told, whereas the gurus have praised them. Yet, at the same time they are threatened with becoming like *shudrās* (*shudrān vāṅgu*), if they do not adhere to *Sikhī*, and instead worship in other ways (*Sundarī*: 116–7). Fidelity to religious practices is emphasized, as is subordination to husbands, but also the fear of slide back into Hinduism.

Though the multiple attempts to abduct Sundarī establish agonistic relations between the Sikhs and Mughals/Muslims, a surprising affinity between them also emerges insofar as these communities proselytize, even when one set of conversions is portrayed as reprehensible and the other as desirable. BVS depicts Hindus, in contrast, as people who not only refuse to convert anyone to their religion but also reject those perceived to have lost faith by sexual or caste impropriety. Yet, the Hindu high caste of Brahmans is described as greedy and manipulating, willing to bend rules for self-aggrandizement. When Dharam Kaur is perceived to have been converted to Islam through forced partaking of forbidden food, the Brahmans refuse to take her back into the Hindu faith despite the Sikhs' request. The Brahmans argue that Hindu religion is like a raw thread (*kachā dhāgā*) which once broken cannot be repaired and that one can only be born a Hindu, not become Hindu through any ceremony (*Sundarī*: 42–3). Yet, the same Brahmans are willing to forgo norms of pollution as long as their palms are greased with bribes. This portrayal of the Brahmans as greedy, manipulating, and cunning was in tune with colonial discourse on the “essential” characteristics of the Brahmans in this period.

BVS displays an ambivalent attitude toward Hindus, one that seems to concede a degree of kinship between Hindus and Sikhs; however, on matters of conversion, he wished to underscore the difference between the two. It is noteworthy that BVS preferred to show a conservative, *Sanātānī*, face of Hinduism, rather than engage with the reformist Arya Samaj's stance. From the mid-1880s, the Arya Samaj started its *shuddhī* program of “purifying” and converting the low castes and sometimes Muslims into Hinduism. That

the Singh Sabha and the Arya Samaj were at loggerheads on many issues including that of conversion and that the relationship between Hindus and Sikhs on this question was strained come through. The notorious case of the conversion of the “outcaste” Rahtia Sikhs to Arya *dharam* in 1900 was to follow soon after the publication of *Sundarī*, making BVS’s discussion of the matter particularly interesting in the period just preceding an even more acrimonious one (Jones 1989: 207–15).

Three further examples from the novel are briefly mentioned to demonstrate BVS’s sometimes conscious, and at others unconscious, inhering to an overarching conservative caste “Hindu” worldview. After Dharam Kaur is rescued from captivity, the Sikhs hold court, administering justice to the village folk, including providing succor to a Muslim woman. After this, the *navāb* who had perpetrated various atrocities, including Kaur’s kidnapping, is unceremoniously hanged to death, the hanging carried out by two scavengers (*chuhṛiyān*) (*Sundarī*: 44). The polluting job of dispensing death is consigned to the “outcastes,” in keeping with caste prejudice. At another time when the Khalsa entourage of Sham Singh asks for rations of a village dominated by Muslims, the Muslims supply dry (unpolluted) rations, which are then cooked by Hindu women and fed to the Sikhs. Here, the fussy food taboos are observed; the commensality rules of caste Hindus are maintained in the food served to Sikhs (*Sundarī*: 22).

The third instance is remarkable, for here BVS deliberately uses semiotic language to arouse emotion but leaves the meaning of the symbol ambiguous. After Sundarī’s second abduction, this time by the minion of the first Mughal *hākam* who had initially captured her, she makes her escape with Bijla Singh after killing the man. BVS at this moment, when she stands with the sword in hand, compares her to goddess Durga, the slayer of demons, the goddess whose elevated status in the time of the tenth Guru became controversial in the time of Singh Sabha (Sundarī is referred to as Devi/goddess multiple times) (Rinehart 2011: 69):

mano Durgā daitān de sañhār nuñ ā khaṛotī hai

like Durga stands to annihilate the demons.

The wound that she inflicts on him is in the shape of *janeyū*, the sacred thread worn by twice-born Hindus:

janeyū vāṅg dūsar pār chīr

sacred thread like penalizing cut.

(*Sundarī*: 66)

Is this an instance of stamping the body of the enemy with the mark of your religion to underscore victory? Is Sundarī still an upper-caste Hindu

Khatri? The reference to *janeyū* at the time of inflicting a mortal wound also evokes the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur who died to protect the symbols of “Hindu” religion like the *janeyū*, as mentioned earlier. Can this fictional killing be seen as a revenge for the death of a cherished Guru? It is difficult to decipher the meaning of this charged symbol but it does arouse affective reaction that points at the fraternity between Hindus and Sikhs.

Conclusion

The novella *Sundarī* defies easy characterization. It was written primarily to accomplish two tasks: create a resolute *Sikhī* with firm boundaries through glimpses of Sikhs’ glorious past and shape a new Sikh woman taking charge of instilling Sikh ideals in herself and in Sikh men through exemplary self-discipline and investment in her own purity. The many stories that unfold in its pages fulfill this work but also unravel it. Sikhs are a separate community but also have affinity with Hindus, Kaura Mal being a case in point. Muslims are depicted as depraved others, their sexual predation of Hindu and Sikh women ostensibly a major threat to the purity of these communities. However, there are similarities between Sikhs and Muslims too, insofar as conversion is encouraged among both communities, though one set is depicted as legitimate and desirable, and the other as violent and forced. Women are meant to be domestic, but they are also out in the jungles wielding swords, even if mindful of womanly chores. Women’s chastity is precious, and sexual aggressors must not be allowed to prey on them. But then the lesson of maintaining chastity has been imbibed well by women themselves, and they do not compromise their bodily integrity at any cost. The new woman of sublimated sexuality is both victim and aggressor – a casualty of sexually charged others, she can also arouse herself and her men to inflict wounds – suppurating gashes that undo wrongs passed down through memory and history.

The circularity of the text, its polyphony, allows for multiple readings, and different audiences apprehend the text in their own specific ways. Is that the reason for the spectacular success of the book because it allows us to pick our own particular history lesson from it, the one tale from its polysemous ones that speaks to us? For a novelistic attempt that is a little over a hundred pages, *Sundarī* has created quite a storm in the many interpretations offered by scholars over a period of time, not to mention the readers picking up the book to learn myriad life-lessons. It is easy to vouchsafe that we haven’t yet heard the last word on *Sundarī*’s multivalent discourses.

Notes

- 1 The title of the novel *Sundarī* will appear in italics, the name of the character Sundari in plain text. All translations from Punjabi are mine.

- 2 For a discussion of the folksong's transmutation in the novel, see Malhotra (2020).
- 3 Ghosh critiques modernity's weapon of rendering other forms of knowledge obsolete and links this with the present climate crisis, as nature came to be tamed in the novel.
- 4 Bhai Mani Singh, a scribe of the tenth guru and a compiler of the Dasam Granth, was executed in 1737 at the behest of the Lahore governor Zakariya Khan.

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5 Revisiting *The Khalsa Samachar* (1899–1900)

Women's Issues and Concerns

Parneet Kaur Dhillon and Jaspal Kaur Dhanju

The *Wazir-i-Hind* Press was started in Amritsar in 1892 by Vir Singh and Wazir Singh, who was a distant maternal relative, with the financial support of Vir Singh's grandfather, Giani Hazara Singh (Giani 1977, 62). The next year, Vir Singh was instrumental in founding the Khalsa Tract Society, with Bhai Kaur Singh, son of S. Sadhu Singh Dhupia. Most of the tracts published by the Society were written by Vir Singh himself. These tracts did not deal with the religious subjects alone and were configured to address "social evils" that had crept in the community (Guleria 1984, 195).

The spirit out of which the Khalsa Tract Society was born later led Bhai Vir Singh to launch a weekly newspaper *The Khalsa Samachar* (hereafter *KS*) on 17 November, 1899 from Amritsar. The advent of this periodical was a formative moment for the Punjabi language, in the Gurmukhi script. There had been several efforts made earlier to start newspapers in Gurmukhi script journalism prior to its founding. The first such newspaper to materialize was *Akhbar Sri Darbar Sahib* which appeared from Amritsar in 1867. Although it used the Gurmukhi script prior to its founding, the language was largely Braj, reflecting a broader commitment to writing in Braj by Sikh intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Vig 2020). Gurmukhi type was still not available in Amritsar and the paper was lithographed from a hand-written copy. However, it met with an early demise, as did several others which followed. One Punjabi newspaper that was able to achieve viability was the *Khalsa Akhbar* (1883), started from Lahore by Gurmukh Singh, who was a Professor in the Oriental College and a leading figure of the Singh Sabha Lahore. Soon, however, *Khalsa Akhbar* too came to an end in 1905. Bhai Vir Singh's *KS* proved not only to be the longest lived Punjabi newspaper but also created a new format and approach to content (H. Singh 1972, 33). The newspaper is still being published from Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan, New Delhi.¹ The longevity of this publication, and its role in innovating Punjabi periodical forms, represents important reasons for revisiting and reinterpreting the paper and its formative role.

Gender was a preoccupation of Vir Singh and other reform-oriented leaders in the Sikh community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as has been discussed in the Introduction to this volume. In this

chapter, we examine the content of *KS* to understand how women's issues were configured in its pages, to understand both the new roles and possibilities open to women, and the ways that these were configured within both existing and novel forms of patriarchal control. We focus primarily on the first year of the publication, as the founding year depicts the aims, objectives and ideology of any organization, to critically analyze the women-related issues and concerns in the first volume of *KS*, published between 17 November, 1899 and 29 October, 1900. The first part of this chapter provides an introduction and general description of the newspaper addressing its evolution, inspiration, aims and objectives. The second part will highlight selected women's issues and concerns by critically analyzing essays, editorials, advisory notes, readers' letters and others pieces written by male and female authors. The third section presents a critical appraisal of a special column "*Istri Sudhar*" or "Women's Improvement." The column represents an account of a Punjabi family, with the position of the women in society as a central theme. The journey of an oblivious young bride aged nine to a settled homemaker daughter-in-law (*nunh*) is delineated. Other roles portrayed include those of the mother-in-law (*sus*) and her son. The son's relationship with the two important female relationships of his life – mother and wife – is a theme, with attention to the societal pressures that impinge on these relationships. The fourth and last section provides concluding remarks.

I

The *Khalsa Samachar*: an introduction

KS was a weekly paper started by Bhai Vir Singh from Amritsar.² It was the first newspaper to show systematic columns, divisions and proper positioning of the head-lines and sub-headings. It was printed from Bhai Vir Singh's own *Wazir-i-Hind* Press, helping to ease logistical issues in printing. Bhai Vir Singh edited *KS* for more than a decade and "remained associated with it till his death" (J. Singh 1982, 286). Bhai Vir Singh kept *KS* alive in spite of the financial loss it involved from year to year. The slender budgets Punjabi newspapers then ran on are apparent from these figures, rounded in rupees, from the first year's audit report: subscriptions, Rs. 381; donations, Rs.123; advertisements, Rs. 120 and printing costs, including paper, Rs. 539. Total expenditure amounted to Rs. 1,069 and income, including a special donation, to Rs. 724, leaving a deficit of Rs. 345 (H. Singh 1984, 34). So from the very first issue of the newspaper, appeals were made to the readers to support the newspaper by taking annual subscriptions and sending wri-teups. The last page of the first issue of *KS* informed the readers, under the heading *Manager di Benti* ("Manager's Request"), that some people were sent the newspaper with the assumption that they would take the subscription. If not notified by them in time about not taking subscription, then

they would be charged for it, so prior information was required to stop the subscription. Another way for getting financial support was a special address under the heading of *Ishtihar* ("Advertisement") made to traders and merchants for promoting their goods. Full-page advertisements were also added (*The Khalsa Samachar* 17 November, 1899, 9).

The first issue, declaring itself "*The Khalsa Samachar* Amritsar: the weekly paper of the Sikhs," was brought out in 1899, coinciding with the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak on 17 November. Most of it, like its successors, was the handiwork of Bhai Vir Singh. Yet, his name appeared nowhere as an editor or sponsor (H. Singh 1972, 34). Monday was indicated as the day of publication (*The Khalsa Samachar* 17 November, 1899, 2) and this was maintained for all for the first year; this continued until 1902. After that, issues were published on Wednesdays and Thursdays as well. In any given year, all the issues were published on one particular day. All the issues published in a year were included in one volume known as a *jilad* and the issues were known as *anks*, with four issues or *anks* per month, resulting in 48–49 *anks* in a year (*The Khalsa Samachar* 17 November, 1899, 8).

The first column on the first page of *KS* clearly described the reasons for starting the newspaper from Amritsar: due to the religious importance of city in association with the Sikh Gurus. It was elaborated that it was only the print media, especially newspapers, which could reach to the masses to propagate the Sikh ideals. Citing the example of the contribution of newspapers in the development of Europe, the Sikh *Qaum* (here, "community") was encouraged to follow in their footsteps in order to prosper. *KS* thus looked up to the West as a source of new ideas for the regeneration of the community. Moreover, the development of Punjabi language, it was argued, was closely linked with more and more publications in Gurmukhi script (*The Khalsa Samachar* 17 November, 1899, 1).

The goals of the weekly paper were to arouse a love of religion among Sikhs while interpreting the Sikh history; to propagate Sikh religion in and outside Punjab; to educate the Sikh masses using Punjabi as the medium; to support the Singh Sabhas and the Chief Khalsa Diwan, Amritsar; to establish the separate socio-religious and political identity of the Sikhs; and to prove that the Sikhs were loyal to the Government. The periodical also represented a response to a perceived threat to Sikhism from Hindu and Muslim organizations (J. Singh 2012, 4). Being a Singh Sabha protagonist, Bhai Vir Singh made *KS* into a potent vehicle for promoting the social and religious reform. Some of its news were borrowed and translated from the contemporary English papers. Initially, the articles were written primarily by educated urban middle class and elite men across class and caste boundaries, but later a few women did contribute.³ But most of the writing was penned with the reformist passion and creative imagination of its editor (H. Singh 1984, 34–35).

The lives of women were a major concern of the weekly, expressed in diverse ways. The authors who contributed articles – mostly the protagonists

of Singh Sabhas – viewed women and their status as transformable through persuasive arguments, speeches, social action and education. *KS*, therefore, initiated a process of regeneration and revitalization of cultural norms and social practices especially where women were the participants. For example, exegesis of the *Adi Granth* and representation of the history of Punjab were both used to explain contemporary changing social realities with an emphasis on women-related issues. *KS* turned to the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the teachings of Sikh Gurus to bolster their cause of female equality and motivate women to acquire education. The Gurus' wives – Bibi Bhani, Mata Gujri and Mata Ganga – were treated as role models (Hayer 2010, 50). *KS* presented Sikhism as a radically different religion from other religions through the selective scriptural passages mainly from the *Adi Granth*. Even the Sikh guru's formulation of ideal womanhood and feminine roles with moral values in the society found place in the issues of the newspaper. The importance of *sukhi grihastha jeevan* ("marital bliss") in one's life was clearly defined.

Furthermore, the creative writing of Bhai Vir Singh had an impact on the fairly wide circle of readership through this weekly paper. The novels written by him were published in the newspaper in serial form. Bhai Vir Singh had perceived a distinct role for women which was reflected in his novels – *Sundari* (1898) and *Bijay Singh* (1899). As Kamlesh Mohan has argued, "While glorifying their chivalrous deeds and relentless struggle against the Afghan or Mughal marauders (who captured Punjabi girls and awakened the sense of pride and self-awareness of the Sikhs about their legacy through the exemplary heroes and heroines, *Sundari* and *Bijoy Singh*), they chose to be initiated into the *Khalsa Panth* and practise its ideals in daily life in all circumstances" (Mohan 2007, 78). These attributes of brave women were reflected in his editorials, notes, articles and writeups in *KS*. Thus, the reform endeavor of the newspaper was based on the construction of Sikh role models and by citing quotations from the religious scripture alongside other literary genres.

The style of writing in *KS* varied from gentle urging to emphatic exhortation. The compositions in *KS* – stories, essays, articles and editorials – had the express purpose of reminding the readers of their basic responsibility to "emancipate" women from the social evils, superstition and ignorance by promoting female education. *KS* became a forum to unveil and denounce *pakhand* (hypocrisy) in performing various rites and rituals by men and especially women in society and instead propagated *bhakti* ("devotion") of the *Akal Purakh*, the Sikh vision of God. With the help of other fellow Singh Sabhaites, Bhai Vir Singh also introduced a special column entitled "*Istri Sudhar*" in *KS* in the very first issue of the weekly paper. The narrative portrayed the picture of a society of that time that was steeped in social evils mainly pertaining to women. The *Istri Sudhar* highlighted the then situation of women while portraying different roles of women – mother (*maan*), daughter (*dhi*), wife (*patni*), daughter-in-law (*nunh*), mother-in-law (*sus*)

and sister-in-law (*nanaan*). The periodical delineated upon all the issues and problems related to all the characters mentioned above. In this way, a pattern of her relations with the family members and community, with a prime focus on trans-generational relations, emerged.

II

Women's issues and concerns

Sikh identity and female education

For the Sikhs, calls for reform were securely embedded in a need to protect a separate Sikh identity from those of the other religious communities (Jakobsh 2003, 122–123). Integral to safeguarding of religious identity by the Singh Sabha in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the women's question. Sikh women were seen as the bearers of tradition and observers of popular religious forms, and thus became important sites upon which the margins of Sikh identity were constructed (Jakobsh 2003, 124). Singh Sabha reformers increasingly turned to fastidious interpretations of Sikh scripture and novel interpretations of Sikh history as the basis of their reform endeavor. Alongside this scriptural focus came the urgent need for education. Literacy of all, males and females, the urban as well as the rural populace, became pivotal to that reformist agenda (Jakobsh 2003, 124).

Educational initiatives were an important aspect of the reformist discourse of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were also a central means by which reformers actively constructed and defined gender (Jakobsh 2003, 128). The *KS* through its columns defined and elaborated the importance of education for the progress of Sikh *Qaum*⁴ by safeguarding the religious ideals described by the Singh Sabha; women had a pivotal role to play in that progress. Due credit was given to the well-educated British and Parsi women for the progress of their respective communities. Similarly, it was asserted that for the prosperity of the Sikh *Qaum*, well literate women were definitely needed (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 4). "Without women education, the columnists of *KS* thought the very task of educating the Sikhs might be defeated" (J. Singh 1982, 289–290). The education of females increasingly came to be viewed as the panacea for the degenerate condition of Sikh society, a way to ensure that women complied with the new demands and expectations of these reformers; these efforts also aligned with the designs of the British, ostensibly to uplift India's womankind. Early reformers and leaders in Punjab wanted to gain positive recognition from the British administration (Jakobsh 2003, 110). Without educated mothers, the Sikhs would continue to be mired in superstition, ignorance and immoral practices; they would also be unable to compete in the milieu offered by their rulers (Jakobsh 2003, 133). Hence, the crusade for female education in the columns of *KS* began with the first issue itself.

In the words of Geraldine Forbes, the reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “dreamed of a world where women would be educated and free from some of the worst customs of the society- child marriage, sati, polygamy. But at the same time, these new women would be devoted to home and family” (Forbes 2009, 35). Along the same lines, the KS perceived education as:

the means of emancipating her from the social evils and making her instrumental in the betterment of the family and society. Without educating woman the task of educating man in the community might prove ineffective as basic changes in lifestyle or values would not take place without changing woman who could link the present to the future through her influence over the children.

(J. Singh 2012, 36)

We can see this perspective in an editorial published six months after the starting of the paper (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 3–4) on the topic “*Khalse di tariki na karne da bhet*” (“Secrets of Khalsa’s lack of progress”). The cited reason was that *sadiyan trimatan* (“our women”) were way behind the men. Only women’s contribution alongside that of men could make the Khalsa *Qaum* progress. Use of the possessive pronoun “*sadian*” (“our”) with “*trimatan*” (women) makes clear that the focus was only on Sikh women and also shows that the audience being addressed was men, in possession of “our women.” The importance of the relationship between husband and wife in married life was described, in which woman was regarded as an *ardh sariri*, a woman who is half a man, completed by her husband. To have a comfortable life, both of them were needed to stay together and help each other in every aspect of their lives. It was exhorted by KS that *ardh sariri naar na chodo* (“as half of one’s body, do not leave behind the woman”) in the shackles of illiteracy, superstition and ignorance; otherwise, they would attain traits of a “*billbatauri*” (most probably a bird from the owl family, a symbol of ignorance) which in turn would affect the progress of the Sikhs. Education for women was thus essential for the removal of tension and misunderstanding between a literate husband and an illiterate wife, who could create problems for her husband and children. If a husband wished to propagate *Khalsa Dharam*, his purpose could be defeated by an illiterate and superstitious wife who would keep her children ignorant and superstitious (J. Singh 2012, 36–37). We see this in the following extract:

Mawaan Anpan te Khalsa dharam ton bekhabriyan ne apne putan nu ki siklana hai, oho vichare bi mawaan wangoon vehmi te bharmi uthde han. Is layi Khalsa Qaum da agaa vi chaur hunda dis reha hai. Je kadi istri sudhar sire char jave Qaum badi cheti wadh sake.

(*The Khalsa Samachar* 17 November, 1899, 7)

What mothers who are unaware of *Khalsa Dharam* would be able to teach their sons? They would also get stuck in superstitions and ignorance like their mothers. If any time women improvement gets completed only then *Qaum* would be able to progress.

Doris R. Jakobsh writes that, “(w)hile the Sikh reformers were aware of the need of for female education, the form, content and end of the endeavour was not nearly as clear” (Jakobsh 2003, 133). Joginder Singh while clarifying the above, delineated that “even the educational curriculum of the Sikh reformers was family oriented. It did not enable her to go for a professional career. Their ‘*Istri Sudhar*’ did not include ‘rights’ of a woman” (J. Singh 2012, 44). *KS* always spoke of *Istri Sudhar* or “the improvement of women” as something that should specifically be within the realm of *Khalsa Dharam*, with women helping their male members of the family (son or husband) to contribute to the prosperity of the *Qaum*. The progress of the *Qaum* was thus seen by *KS* through a prism where men were the primary representative and women taken as the passive contributor. The education of women was to be deeply religious and moral, based on Sikh religious principles, ultimately leading to the progress of the Sikh *Quam*. In this way, the “education of girls and women was expected to lead to a situation where the true helpmate could discharge her duties in the home properly” (Jakobsh 2003, 136). At the same time, the bravery and valor of women was portrayed as enhancing the overall progress of the Sikh community. Female role models from the Sikh and world history (like *Mai Bhago*) along with the present colonial rulers and progressive Indian communities like Parsis were traced to inspire Sikhs to make efforts for their women as well. The newspaper in this way set up a dichotomy between an “ideal woman” which existed earlier, especially in Sikh history, and an “actual woman” of the present times. Further, literary extracts from the *Adi Granth* and Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson’s poem were used to validate the point on need of the women’s role for the progress of the Sikhs.

Jakobsh has pointed out that “what was increasingly apparent, at least to the small group of Sikh reformers, was the need to protect their young women from educational advances of the Arya Samajists, as well as from Christian missionaries” (Jakobsh 2003, 133). A news item mentioning “*anmateyan de madraseyan di than ladkiyan gurnat sikhya paun*” (Girls should get gurnat education instead of other faiths) (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 1) in the *KS* urged the people of Sikh *Quam*, especially the wealthy, to donate for Amritsar’s Girls Gurnat School, which had scarcity of funds. The financial aid would help in opening more such schools, which would help girls to get education consistent with Sikh ideals instead of what was imparted in other schools run by different faiths. *KS* openly supported the Sikh community and was never hesitant to speak against the other religious identities of the colonial Punjab; the need for the education of women was framed in relation to a sense of threat from the advancement of other communities.

Private and public space for the Sikh women

The notion of service along with that of duty increasingly became the slogan of the Singh Sabha reformers in their effort to transform Sikh women. The inauguration of Sikh girls' schools opened a novel occupational option for the Sikh women – to serve as teachers at the various girls' schools. With this, a new feminine ideal came to be instituted: one who gave her services to the fledgling educational enterprise. Deeply held Sikh values stressing service, gratuitous service in the case of women teachers, came to be embodied by those who were willing to cast off the traditional shackles of honor (Jakobsh 2003, 157). KS informed the readers about 60 female students studying in the Gurmat Kanya Pathshala of Jammu without paying any fee. The girls were given skilled education (here *dastkari*) especially weaving, embroidery, craft and other skills (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 1). It was highlighted that school was being successfully managed by Pandita Jeewan Mukta, who was praised by the Sikh community for her contribution. The girl students who were well-versed in the *banis* of *Khalsa Dharam* viz. *Sukhmani Sahib*, *Asa di var*, *Rehraas*, *Japji Sahib*, *Kirtan Sohela* and others were rewarded with cash prizes (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 2). The curriculum was drafted mainly to prepare the girls as experts in their private sphere as homemakers but the encouragement for female teachers by Sikh *Qaum* presented a fair ground for them in public sphere as well. Here, KS addresses women of Punjab, and especially Sikh Community, in the public and private domains.

The public domain was not only enjoyed by women as teachers; Sikh women were also attending the *Khalsa Dharam Prachar Sabhas* (Societies for the Propagation of the Khalsa Faith). Using the description of “lionesses” or “*Shernian*” for the Sikh women as the members of *Khalsa Istri Dharam Prachar Sabha*, Amritsar, it was described that they participated in the birth anniversary celebrations of Guru Nanak under the able guidance of the President of the Sabha, Pandit Kripa Devi alias Isher Kaur, to great success (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1899, 1). Such activities demonstrate the movement of Sikh women from their homes to the public arena as leaders of religious congregations, as well as in the role of participants. This represented a shift in their domains, for a religious purpose. Specified arenas were thus provided to Sikh women by male reformers without disturbing the patriarchal system where women had an assigned role to play.

Another intervention made in KS was on the pilgrimages done by Sikh women. An anonymous person raised a question on *Ikeli Yatra* (“Lone pilgrimage”) of the Sikh women to the Harmandir Sahib, Amritsar in the question/answer section to the editor, where questions pertaining to society were published. Here, the answer of editor initially discouraged Sikh men from sending their women alone, because of the rising cases of theft and sexual harassment. But still, if women wished to go alone, they were warned to take extra caution for their safety (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 8).

Hence, the newspaper spoke openly about the mobility of women in public spaces, but with constraints.

Openly ridiculing the religious persons of the other communities, especially of the *Hindu Dharam*, in connection with the safety of Sikh women, was a common trait of *KS*. An incident was mentioned of two women taking a holy dip in the *sarowar* of Harminder Sahib, where they were harassed by a *sadhu* (Hindu holy men) in form of a stare. This upsets them, and after getting scolding from the ladies, the *sadhu* flees the place. The newspaper gives the heading to the news as *Hindu Qaum de pun ton pale mustande phal den lag paye han* ("Impact of donations made by Hindu *Qaum*") (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 1–2). The epithet "*mustande*" is used for the *sadhus* of Hindu community, who due to ample alms have become strong and robust, and, it is stated in the article, trouble the Sikh women when they go on pilgrimage. Another incident in the same issue of *KS* described a Sikh lady who was robbed of her jewelry while taking holy dip in the *sarowar* (at a place especially constructed for women). A request to the gurdwara authorities to take measures for the safety of women by appointing a person to keep a watch on the entrance of this area of the *sarowar* for women was made. Reportage of such incidents supported the concern of the weekly for women's safety and maintained a superior position for Sikhism.

This new dichotomy – between the private and public domains of women – emerged in *KS* in a way that gave rise to a new patriarchy, where women got freedom as long as they demonstrated the spiritual and feminine qualities in accordance with the new norms of social behavior and maintained existing patterns of gender hierarchy and roles. Women were encouraged to go to schools, travel to public places (especially pilgrimage sites), participate in women religious congregations and take up jobs as teachers, but within the limitations prescribed by advocates of "*Istri Sudhar*."

Women and the popular cultural practices – folk songs

Popular religious forms conjoined the various religious communities in Punjab, resulting in the cultural, social and religious fluidity which characterized nineteenth-century Punjabi society (Jakobsh 2003, 135). Jakobsh further notes that the arena of women's rituals, previously outside the jurisdiction of male authority and experience, became increasingly viewed as contributing to immoral behavior; these rituals were thus perceived as largely responsible for all that was wrong with Punjabi society. We can see this in the *KS*, where the popular cultural practices of then Punjabi society, especially the singing of folk songs, were perceived as *Gande geet* (dirty songs). Such practices needed to be replaced with the recitation of *Gurbani* by women. Importantly, *KS* further argued that along with women, a section of Sikh menfolk was also responsible for the prevalence of these songs during the marriage ceremonies. Hence, both genders were criticized for such practices. For example, an editorial namely *Gande geet* ("Dirty

songs”) (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 3) castigated both women who practiced such singing since childhood and male family members who acted as the audience, especially older men who said *sithniyan bina jee karara ni hunda* (“without listening to those, they do not get happiness”). Keeping the patriarchal ideology firm, the *KS* did not hesitate to criticize male family members for acting as listeners of those *geet*. The women under the influence of *gande geet* would attain attributes affecting their behavior in the society which would bring stigma to their *Qaum* in the eyes of the *bidesi* (“foreigners”). Women were criticized for singing in front of their *bhara*, *sauhra*, *jeth*, *pati* (brother, father-in-law, brother-in law). *KS* branded the ritual practices especially *gande geet* as major agents for corrupting the mind of the people who were responsible stakeholders of the Sikh *Qaum*.

No doubt *KS* rejected some of the popular cultural practices of women in the patriarchal context it existed in, but it also gave advisories and instructions to women and men collectively wherever the progress of Sikh *Qaum* was concerned. Men’s behavior toward women was also regulated: the act of calling women as “the slipper of feet” (*pair di jutti*) was condemned by the *KS* by making reference to the quote of Guru Nanak about women – *So kyon manda akheye jit jame rajan* (“why use foul language for those gave birth to kings”). Anshu Malhotra has noted that women’s “labour and reproductive potential were appropriated by high castes, their own beings were often condemned as low, *shudra*-like and a woman was seen as a slipper of the feet” (*parian di jutti*) (Malhotra 2002, 119), but here we see the *KS* citing Guru Nanak to remind Sikh men not to use the epithets – “*paran di jutti*” for the Sikh women. The Punjabi society at that time was divided on the basis of caste and class, so it is notable that the *KS* articulated a critique of such discourses and admonished men for engaging in them.

III

“*Istri Sudhar*”: a special section on women

With the help of other fellow Singh Sabhaites, Bhai Vir Singh introduced a special column entitled “*Istri Sudhar*” in *KS* in the very first issue of the weekly paper. The fictional story of a family was published in a form of a series. The narrative portrayed society of that time as one that was steeped in social evils mainly pertaining to women. One can see a similarity with the other literary genres (especially the novels) of Bhai Vir Singh, in which he developed a sense of a community at a particular time in a particular literary account. Vir Singh’s novel *Satwant Kaur* was also printed as a series in the newspaper and a defined place was assigned to that novel: in every issue, “*Istri Sudhar*” and “*Satwant Kaur*” appeared one after the other. Like Vir Singh’s novels, the “*Istri Sudhar*” opened with the better position of women in the ancient period and the deteriorating situation in the medieval period. It then presented the different roles for women – mother (*maan*), daughter

(*dhi*), wife (*patni*), daughter-in-law (*nunh*), mother-in-law (*sus*) and sister-in-law (*nanan*). The periodical elucidated almost all the issues and problems related to the characters mentioned above. In this way, a pattern of her relations with the family members and community, with a prime focus on trans-generational relations, emerged. The first six series of “*Istri Sudhar*” described the important role of women in the society and how their status had deteriorated. Later from the seventh *ank* of the first *jilad* of the newspaper, a story of a family is narrated in which a young girl of nine years is married and the last *ank* of *The Khalsa Samachar* describes the pitiable condition of the mother-in-law (*sus*), who was on her death bed. Almost every issue of the newspaper in its first year had the column “*Istri Sudhar*.”⁵

The first writeup of the “*Istri Sudhar*” (*The Khalsa Samachar* 17 November, 1899, 7) began with “*Sada sankalp hai ke ehnan vishyan te kuj kuj likheya kariye ta ke Sadiyan gharan wich baithiyan maayian bibiyan dhiyan bhainan nu bi kuj sooj pave ar quami daur wich sahayeta hove*” (“Our resolve is that we will write regularly on these subjects so that our women sitting at homes – the mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters would gain understanding and help in race of community’s progress”). In the same column, some of the fellow Singh Sabhaites were lambasted for not making efforts to improve the position of their women by either educating or making efforts to explain to them Sikh ideals; this was presented as the major reason for slow rate of progress of the *Khalsa Qaum*. The criticism was also done of the illiterate, ignorant and superstitious women as mothers for not raising sons properly who have to play a constructive role in prosperity of the *Qaum*.

Further “*Istri Sudhar*” highlighted how the women in Punjab, in order to save their honor from the foreign invaders, adopted purdah, child marriage and the practice of not sending girls to the schools. Later, they got accustomed to those practices without knowing their ill-effects. Hence, the women, who were considered *ardhagini* (of the same body) of their husband, got confined to the four walls of the houses doing just *ghar di neech sewa* (“humble manual housework”) and in this way attained the position similar to *shudras* (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1899, 6). They were not involved in any of deeds of *dharam karam* (morality) and lack of that made them impatient, coward and distrustful, and excessive love for their children and jewelry gradually aroused. Their vulnerability helped *paitpaloo brahaman* and *pakhandi sadhus* (hypocrite priests) to trick them, similar to what was done to *shudras* by the brahmins (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1899, 6). Similarly, it discussed the circumstances which led to women’s lower position based on their work and claimed to improve that through education.

Hereafter, the narrative in “*Istri sudhar*” began with a marriage of a daughter aged nine under the societal pressure and influence of pandits, explaining that the late marriage of a daughter would transform her into a *paapi* (sinner). The British restriction on marriage of a girl under a specific age as a punishable offense did not stop her family from marrying

her off. The pre-marriage *Khara* gifting ceremony was performed and the groom thought of receiving jewelry, the bride dreamt of intricate embroidered clothes, the *pandit* imagined the money needed for his children, the parents welcomed shedding the burden of a daughter from their shoulders and the relatives thought of the wedding feast. Subsequently, the column claimed the superiority of Sikh ideals, informing that those marriages were performed in the communities who said that they belonged to “the *Qaum* of *Mata Sita aur Damyanti*” (here, community worshipping Hindu goddesses) (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 6–7). It can be argued here that *KS* always tried to claim superiority of the Sikh identity and ridiculed the popular practices or ceremonies performed by the populace of that period.

The “*Istri Sudhar*” in the next few columns described the dichotomy of young *nunh*’s performance at the in-laws place and expectations of a *sus* from her. After one year of marriage, the *nunh* does household chores, but not up to the *sus*’s expectations. The in-laws inspect her expertise in domestic work. When unable to perform, the daughter-in-law panicked and started telling lies to cover up her misgivings; she then shared all her secrets with her husband’s sister (*nanan*), who deceived her by confiding in her mother, the girls of neighborhood and lastly told everything to her sister and mother (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 5). In the conflict of the *nunh* and *sus*, the inter-generational communication of same gender emerged, while the husband was nowhere to be found, highlighting the communication gap between the two. The principle of *sukhi grahastha jeeven* (a “life of marital bliss”) seems to be missing here.

The next stage in “*Istri Sudhar*” described further predicaments of the *nunh*. The interference of *nunh*’s *peke* (natal family) in the affairs of her in-laws was not appreciated by the *sus*, who complains to her son, after which he becomes violent with his wife. The regular thrashing by her husband and taunts of the *sus* affected the daughter-in-law’s health and she went to her *peke*. Later, the *hakeems* and *vaid*s (medical practitioners of that time) provided treatment and the in-laws were informed, who hardly came to see her. After the *nunh*’s death, the *sus* cried bitterly and performed *siyapa* (ritual mourning performed by women). Within the next few months, the *sus* married her widower son on the pretext of her loneliness (not her son’s) (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 6, 4–5, 5).

The second part of the narrative explained how the second wife of the son after marriage, decked up with ornaments resembling *Sita* of *Ramleela*, was given a warm welcome. The same day, the comparison based on beauty with the first *nunh* was made by the neighborhood women, which was disliked by the second wife, and later comparison was made on the household working styles and efficiency of the two by her *sus*. This enraged the second wife further. She did not like that she wore clothes of the earlier *nunh* in her first year of marriage. The *nunh* complained about these comparisons to her husband, who initially did not get affected but eventually he gave a patient hearing to his wife, as he did not

want to lose her. The tussle between the *sus* and *nunh* began from there (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 4–5, 5).

The “*Istri Sudhar*” described that the *sus*’s illiteracy and lack of learned company did not allow her to have a compassionate relationship with her *nunhs*. The constant quarrels between them created an uneasy situation at home, especially for the son, who had to listen to both sides and their problems. Morally and ethically, he was needed to act as a “*Sarvan Puttar*” (“ideal son”) – obedient to his parents – but also he did not want to lose his wife a second time. Subsequently, that situation made him decide to get a separate house for her mother in a nearby street. Due to societal pressure and fear of staying alone, the *sus* asked her son in desperation “*mere boohe mard di juti nahi khulegi*” (“Won’t any shoes of male be seen in her house?”) (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 5–6). The “*Istri Sudhar*” elucidated that the *sus* instead was made to stay on the ground floor portion of the same house, with Rs. 5–6 as monthly expenditure fixed by son, who due to illiteracy became *kuput* (an “immoral son”). Fearing him, the mother did not speak against her *kupati nunh* (“immoral *nunh*”) and she engaged herself in listening of the *Suraj Prakash* of Bhai Santokh Singh in the neighborhood. From there onward, her spiritual journey began, which trained her to ignore the uncouth behavior of her *nunh* (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 5). The *nunh* further poisoned ears of the son against his mother, which stopped him giving her the promised monthly allowance, so the *sus* went to neighbor’s house for food in exchange of work. Soon the *nunh* conceived and gave birth to a son. Ignoring the earlier unpleasant behavior of *nunh*, the *sus* took good care of her and they all stayed together peacefully for about a year in the same house. But once when the baby boy got hurt, the *nunh* blamed the *sus* for not taking care of him properly. After this, the *nunh* announced that she would be given food if only she remained cautious with the baby (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 5). In this way, the KS laid emphasis on the continuous conflict between the actual and ideal roles of the characters of the story. Illiteracy was considered as the only reason for a person deviating from their ideal role, and social insecurity and economic dependency on men trapped the women in the existing patriarchy.

The narrative in column elaborated that after some years, the weak and old mother was left alone in the house and the couple went for pilgrimage to Mathura and Gaya. The son left the house without meeting his mother and making any food arrangements for her. The maxim was used for them – “*Navan chale teerathi man khote tan chor*” (“They went to bathe at sacred shrines of pilgrimage, but their minds were still evil and their bodies were thieves”). Fat offerings were paid to the saints in Mathura and on reaching Gaya, and the son conducted *pind daan*, a ritual in honor of the deceased, of his dead father who had sacrificed his life to bring out *Adi Granth* from a room in *dharamshala* which was set on fire. The pandits performed the *pind daan* of his father and even inquired if he wanted to perform the same for his alive mother, which could save his time and the bother of visiting

Gaya again. Agreeing with them, he performed the *pind daan* of his living mother by offering sweets (here *ladoos*), all while back at home his mother was starving for basic food (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 4–5). To establish the superiority of Sikh ideals in the then-Punjabi society, the “*Istri Sudhar*” describes that *tankhaiya*, or punishment, was given to the son at Takhat Sahib (Patna) because he performed *pind daan*. On reaching home, the couple was shocked to see the mother was still alive, as she was provided food by a local Sikh social worker. The couple rebuked the mother for getting them insulted in society, but thereafter she was provided food by them, to maintain their false reputation in their *baradari* (family network) (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 4).

The last stage of the old *sus* was depicted in the column when she was on her death bed. Instead of doing *sewa* (“service” or “care”) or showing any emotional attachment to his mother, the son was shown busy calling *haqims* and *vaids*. He performed the *Gandaura* ceremony, providing food to close relatives and made donations to the brahmans for her mother’s health. Not having a daughter added to the misery of the old mother. The attribute of *Sewa bhav* (“the emotional state of service”) was attached to a daughter and it was considered if she would have had a daughter, her condition would have not been as bad as it was being a mother of son. In the end, the *sus* died in a deplorable situation (*The Khalsa Samachar* 1900, 5).

Thus, it be seen that *KS* firmly believed that instead of performing popular rites and rituals, only moral deeds (especially taking care of old parents) could make the *Akalpurakh* shower blessings. *KS* claimed that the way to emancipate “their women” from social evils was through female education with paramount concentration on the religious and moral values. The responsibility of having stable social behaviors was fixed for both males and females, in keeping with the patriarchal norms of the time. Interestingly, however, we also see a strong argument expressed against son preference: the old woman would have fared better if she had had a daughter. This was an important statement in a period when son preference was promoted in other sections of society (Purewal 2010).

Conclusion

KS took up almost all the major issues related to Sikh community, in general, and women in particular in its first year of publication from 1899 to 1900. *KS* addressed issues such as female illiteracy; girl child marriage; the lure for ornaments; the stigma of a widow; societal pressures resulting in double standards; blind faith on customs, rites and rituals; the tussle between adoption of Sikh ideals and Hindu rites and ceremonies and the like. What was written and promulgated through the column “*Istri Sudhar*” of the paper was claimed by *KS* as not imaginary or fictional but inspired from true events. So, an appeal was made to the readers of the

newspaper to learn from the mistakes of the characters mentioned in the extracts in order to avoid committing such aberrations themselves.

The *KS* reflected its time period, when the reformist agenda in India was at peak. As such, it utilized “women’s issues” to establish the superiority of the Sikh identity. Without making much changes in the patriarchal set-up, both the genders were made accountable if they were to contribute to the progress of *Qaum*. The *sukhi grihasta jeewan* (marital bliss) with proper moral conduct was seen as key to a progressive society. In this way, new roles for women were imagined, within the constraints of patriarchy, and not outside of them. However, the liberal human content of the reformist agenda paved the way to a greater sensitization toward women issues.

Notes

- 1 The other editors of the newspaper, besides Vir Singh, were Bhai Sewa Singh from 1914–1944, S. S. Anmol Singh from 1973–1976, S. Manjit Singh from 1976–1990 (Giani 1977, 80). In December 1990, this weekly newspaper was shifted to Delhi and published by Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan under the editorship of Dr. J.S Neki and Dr. Mohinder Singh, from which it continues to be published (Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan n.d., 1).
- 2 In size, it measured of size 20" × 26". It was printed with 16-point type and appeared with improved printing and designing, compared with comparable contemporary publications.
- 3 For example, Isher Devi alias Kripa Devi of Amritsar wrote a letter to the editor in the issue of 18 December, 1899 requesting the people to donate for Gurmat School for girls in Amritsar.
- 4 *KS* at some places has used *Khalsa Qaum* instead of Sikh *Qaum*.
- 5 The 4th, 9th, 10th, 19th, 29th, 33rd, 37th and 47th issues (*anks*) dated 11 December, 1899; 15 January; 22 January; 26 March; 4 June; 2 July; 30 July and 8 October, 1900, respectively, of *The Khalsa Samachar* did not publish the column “*Istri Sudhar*.”

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6 Didacticism and Punjabi Theatre

Bhai Vir Singh's Experimental *Raja Lakhdata Singh*

Gunjeet Aurora Mehta

Introduction

Bhai Vir Singh's contribution to Punjabi literature, thought and culture needs no introduction. He straddled the literary landscape of Punjab at a time when it was experiencing flux with the rise of new genres, styles of expression and the emergence of social and religious themes. While prominently known as a poet, exegete and novelist, Bhai Vir Singh also made a foray in the field of drama with his experimental play, *Raja Lakhdata Singh* ([1910] 2015), which is one of the founding plays of modern Punjabi drama. This chapter analyses the play as a didactic text enunciating the philosophy of the Singh Sabha and the power of education as the only panacea for combating the malaise affecting the Sikh *quam*. The introductory *binay* or request describes the play as an attempt at presenting a realistic portrayal of the contemporary state of Sikhs and charting a path of reform for them (Singh *Raja Lakhdata Singh*, 11). The task of reforming the Sikhs, or the *qaum*, is entrusted to the protagonist of the play *Raja Lakhdata*. This was not the first play to be written in Punjabi as Bawa Buddh Singh's *Chander Hari* (1909) preceded this by a year. Nonetheless, Bhai Vir Singh aspired to lay the foundations of Punjabi drama with this '*qaumi drama*' (11) and it is in this context that this chapter will analyse the text as a didactic mouthpiece of the author for espousing the cause of education and the Singh Sabha ideology. The play is also located in relation to the contemporary socio-religious discourses of the time to better understand its position in modern Punjabi literary history.

Punjabi theatre: influences and growth

While modern Punjabi drama can be said to have emerged fully in the twentieth century only, there were certain theatrical practices prevalent in Punjab at the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century along with the traditional performance culture of *swaangs*, *bhaands*, *naquals* and the oral performances of the *qissas* and other literary pieces (Mir 2010). According to the historian J. S. Grewal, the 'emergence

of Punjabi drama as a literary form in the early twentieth century is a pointer to the nature of social change that was coming about in the Punjab' (*Emergence of Punjabi Drama* 3). Raja Lakhdata Singh and the emergence of Punjabi drama also need to be viewed in the larger socio-historical context of colonialism. Grewal further states that the 'cultural response which expressed itself in literary resurgence and the emergence of new literary forms' was as important as the 'political, social or religious response' to colonialism by the people of Punjab (3). The experimentation with a new genre is part of this literary response to the colonial situation and may also be seen as partly influenced by education in English language and literature. At the same time, it ushered a new way of bringing forth messages, themes and entertainment for the masses. It can be argued here that socio-religious changes in the form of the establishment of the Arya Samaj, the Ahmadiyah and the Singh Sabha movements in Punjab – termed the 'moral languages of Punjab' by Linden (2008), the rise of the middle class, the expanding role of the Punjabi language and the growth of print culture all helped in creating conditions conducive for the rise of this genre. The need and desire to explore new contemporary forms of literature other than the traditional *qissa* or *var* reflects the Punjabi writer's response to a changing world. In this respect, drama can be seen as an attempt at reaching out to the masses through the written word in a new genre, as well as considering the genre of performance as a possible medium for disseminating new ideas. BVS also states in his prefatory remarks that despite the presence of numerous books, newspapers, etc., devoted to the cause of Sikh reform, to 'present the actual situation before our eyes in the theatre would also be a useful method of reform' (11 trans mine). However, it appears that most of these plays were not performed and between these early experiments and the arrival of I. C. Nanda's social realism, the form did not really garner too many followers which may lead us to surmise that the didactic themes and style of these early plays coupled with the lack of a strong indigenous theatre culture and infrastructure were primarily responsible for the slow growth of this genre during the early part of the twentieth century.

While early modern Punjabi drama in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depicts the influence of classical Indian drama, folk performance traditions, Parsi theatre and Western drama, it was not as well developed or robust in form and content as other regional Indian theatrical traditions such as Marathi, Bengali and Gujarati, which were politically subversive and had even faced strict censorship at the hands of the British. By the time drama was recognised as a promising new genre in Punjabi, theatre was already well established in most Indian languages and had explored not just its power for invoking nationalist and popular sentiments through mythological and other themes, but also emerged as a potent means of resistance. Since Punjab's annexation took place in 1849, Punjab's exposure to the forces of colonialism along with its cultural, political and social ramifications also took place later than most other states.

This may partly account for the late emergence of modern Punjabi drama as compared to drama in other languages. It is also important to note here that while print culture had permeated the Punjabi literary scene, most of the books that were published contained poetry. Critic and playwright Manjit Pal Kaur (1993) observes that traditionally, poetry occupied a more elevated status in Punjabi literary culture since the *Gurbaani* itself is composed of poetry and the status of the poet was more revered (9). This is not to say that the element of the dramatic was not present in Punjabi poetry or literature prior to drama. The inclusion of the dialogic literary device *sawaal wa jawaab* or 'question and answer' in many early Punjabi printed books formed linkages between print and performance (Mir, 93). It also points to the existence of the dramatic in other forms in Punjabi literature. Incidentally, even Bhai Vir Singh's play which makes several references to the Sikh Gurus starts with a quote from the *Bachittar Natak* by Guru Gobind Singh.

Prior to the formal literary beginnings of Punjabi drama, there is evidence of some theatrical performances in Punjab such as *Alladin* and *Indur Sabha* as described by J. C. Oman in his books *The Brahmans, Theists and Muslims of India* (1907) and *Customs, Cults and Superstitions of India* (1908) as well as some attempts at play writing like Dr. Charan Singh's didactic temperance play, *Sharab Kaur* (Verma 2014, 13), Giani Dit Singh's *Raja Prabodh Candra* (1906), etc. Early attempts at writing plays in Punjabi thus comprise mostly religious, mythological, historical themes and puranic kathas. 'In keeping with the temper of the times, these were historical or religious plays aimed more at a literary readership than a performance audience. These plays were aimed at propagating and inculcating certain religious and social values among the people of the time' (Aurora 2014, 272). The more formal beginnings of Punjabi drama are marked by social changes and changing literary perceptions, which consolidated themselves in the plays written by early dramatists like Bawa Buddh Singh, Bhai Vir Singh, Brij Lal Shastri and of course I.C. Nanda. The colonial enterprise of education had a definite impact on the development of Punjabi drama, though it was not the only factor. The introduction of a 'new type of education, with a strong dose of modern science, English literature and social sciences' was embraced by most Punjabis (Grewal, *The Emergence of Punjabi Drama*, 1). In fact, even the play *Raja Lakhdata Singh*, despite appealing to nationalist sentiments, espouses the cause of education which includes Western scientific education as well.

The early playwrights were influenced by the structure and form of Western drama. The influence of classical Sanskrit drama was equally dominant as is evident in the style and use of dramatic conventions such as *Prastavna* (Introduction) and *sutradhar*. Early Punjabi drama was also influenced by the presence of the popular melodramatic Parsi theatre more particularly by the style of Agha Hashar Kashmiri, an Urdu dramatist who performed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The

emergence of the middle class is yet another important factor in the rise of Punjabi drama, a point emphasised by J.S. Grewal (567). He locates most of these early playwrights, Bawa Buddh Singh, Bhai Vir Singh, Brij Lal Shastri and I. C. Nanda, within the professional middle class and opines that these early dramatists should not be viewed in isolation but seen as ‘representative of a certain section of the Punjabis’ as their plays point to a ‘complex social history’ of the times (*History in Punjabi Drama*, 567). However, it should also be noted that in the absence of a strong dramatic or theatrical bed-rock or heritage, these early dramatists, inspired by the various influences around them, developed their own individual views regarding the course that this literary form should take in the Punjabi context and therefore each represents his own unique sensibility through his dramatic compositions. At a time when print culture had started gaining ground giving an impetus to people to write, ‘The future appeared to hold a great promise and every early writer could think of himself as the founder of a new literary form, if not of a “national drama”’ (Grewal, *History in Punjabi Drama*, 563). The growing visibility of middle-class writers through the medium of print helped in not just disseminating views but also establishing identities as Punjabi writers, although Bhai Vir Singh himself generally published his works anonymously.

In 1909, Bawa Buddh Singh wrote the play *Chander Hari* in Punjabi which aimed at exposing a shallow middle-class society. Deeply concerned with the development and growth of Punjabi, Bawa Buddh Singh felt that the forms of novel and drama could contribute the most towards the development of the Punjabi language. However, this focus on Punjabi was not to be seen as a ‘religious concern’ but a ‘contribution to the development of the country’ (Grewal, *The Emergence of Punjabi Drama*, 7). Some critics feel that the play *Raja Lakhdatta Singh* was written by Bhai Vir Singh as a reaction against *Chander Hari* (Sekhon and Duggal, 1992, 332). The two although written a year apart are quite different in their tone, theme and intent. While *Raja Lakhdatta Singh* is accepted as the first play written by Bhai Vir Singh, recently another composition by Bhai Vir Singh, *Zaina da Virlapp* ([1902] 2015), which is a part of the composition *Kalgidhar Chamatkaar*, has been published as an early play. The play is a verse-drama in three scenes and lacks a defined action or plot. At its best, it can be described as a sustained piece of dramatic writing in verse rather than a full-fledged play. This chapter thus turns to *Raja Lakhdatta Singh* as Bhai Vir Singh’s first formal play and discusses its main aspects as a didactic play.

Raja Lakhdatta Singh: an analysis

In an age when the cause of social reform dominated the socio-cultural landscape, it is no wonder that most of the early modern dramatists felt that ‘one of the effective ways of reform is the depiction of social reality

in a dramatic form' (Grewal, *History in Punjabi Drama*, 565). The theme of reforming the '*qaum*' or Sikhs through education is the foremost concern of the play. Religion, conversion, the straying of the Sikh populace from the fold of Sikhism in contemporary times is what forms the crux of the play *Raja Lakhdata Singh*. Both Grewal (1986) and Pankaj K. Singh (2000) read the term '*quami* drama' in the play's introductory remarks as 'national drama' where 'a Panjabi playwright could also equate Sikh *Panth* with *quam* i.e. nation' (Singh, 30). For Grewal, 'Bhai Vir Singh's equation of the Sikh *quam* is suggestive; his "national drama" is neither Indian nor Punjabi; it is Sikh' (Grewal 1983, 19). The conflation of the terms national and *quami* present an interesting situation where despite the consciousness of the larger physical entity, Hindustan (as stated in the play) as well as the acknowledged presence of a colonial power, it is the more immediate entity of the Sikh community in a kingdom under Raja Lakhdata that defines the sense of being a *quam*.

Bhai Vir Singh had already marked the beginnings of the Punjabi novel with the novel *Sundri* ([1898] 2013) aimed at making the Sikhs aware of their glorious past. As the foreword states:

Our purpose to write this book is that the knowledge of past events should confirm the Sikhs in their religious beliefs, enable them to perform their spiritual and temporal duties with felicity and shed their vices altogether...and remain steadfast to the Guru's dictum about equality permeating the whole humanity.

(quoted by Gill 2005, 441)

There is a common religious concern and an emphasis on the Singh Sabha philosophy which marks the early novels and play despite differences in the theme, treatment and representation of Sikhs. Speaking in the context of the novel, Harjot Oberoi (1994) observes, 'Bhai Vir Singh, a leading figure of Punjabi letters, was the first master craftsman to employ the structure of the new literary form to further the Singh Sabha's ideology' (332). The same can be said in the case of drama also as experimented with by BVS which portrays the ideology of the Sabha as one of the dominant themes of the play. *Raja Lakhdata* is an argument in favour of education as a panacea to the ills assailing the Sikh community at large. In keeping with the didactic tone of the play, the author declares his intent to be just this in the introduction itself.

The play opens with a quote from Guru Gobind's composition *Bachittar Natak* which sets the lofty tone of the play as being one that seeks to instruct rather than entertain and ends with the chorus invoking him as the *kalgiyan wala* who has awakened the masses. In this context, Grewal states that 'the entire programme of reform has the sanction of Guru Gobind Singh' (18). The structure lacks sophistication which is on account of it being an early experiment with the form. The foreword depicts the

playwright's consciousness of ushering a new genre in Punjabi with the intention of disseminating a message of reform aided by references to the Gurus and scriptures. It is a play that launches a social critique of modern Sikh society along with voicing a strong religious concern. The play or '*qaumī nātak*' consists of images and vignettes of the moral decline in the Sikh race/religion and attempts at reviving the lost values and glory of the *qaum* through education. While a dominantly didactic and moralistic tone is present throughout the play, yet there are instances of entertainment also, much in the vein of Western dramatic traditions and Sanskrit classical drama.

The conflation of the genre with the theme of reform and education points to the potential role of drama in the social sphere as envisioned by Bhai Vir Singh. It is also a marker of the overall growth and expansion of Punjabi literature. There are references to the play having been performed (Khosla, 1984, 11) but there is nothing very conclusive in terms of production detail that is available. The play is steeped in the socio-religious changes and issues taking place in Punjab at the time. Bhai Vir Singh refers to the four distinct religious identities present in Punjab: Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Christian at various points in the play with the intent of showing how backwards the Sikhs were as compared to the other communities which had already witnessed resurgence in the form of various social movements. The playwright even uses comparative numbers showing how different communities were progressing along various parameters to drive home this point. Apart from the presence of a few religious figures belonging to other communities, Bhai Vir Singh chooses to only report the activities of other communities, with the play's social space dominantly populated by Sikhs as the visible community. Given that the primary impetus of the formation of the Singh Sabha was the issue of conversion, the play also concerns itself with this theme at various points in the play.

While most other communities are depicted on the path of progress, the most scathing critique is reserved for the Sikhs, their false spiritual leaders and the indifferent upper class. Bhai Vir Singh's novels glorify the Sikh traditions of valour, religiosity and moral virtues as pitted against other communities and are set in earlier times. The play, however, showcases contemporary Sikhs as having fallen from their once glorious position and lost sight of their moral and religious values. The duty of leading the masses or *qaum* out from the malaise that it is stuck in is entrusted to Raja Lakhdata, the protagonist, however not with swords this time, but by using the tools of the new world, education. The play follows a simple plot through various vignettes that depict the moral awakening of the King and his gradually strengthening resolve to uplift his people. Unlike other protagonists, the Raja does not emerge as a hero from the beginning, neither does he undergo any dramatic events which test his courage. As Pankaj Kumar Singh (2000) comments, 'For the most part Lakhdata Singh is a passive, regretful, bemoaning spectator of the plight of the Sikhs but occasionally

he becomes active in the service of the *Panth*' (30). He is spiritually awakened from the stupor of moral laxity by a saint who instructs him to reform the masses. The choice of the central protagonist as Raja or King, though indicative of a feudal order, can be seen as a desire on the part of the playwright to create a guide who can lead the Sikhs towards progress and at the same time help remain steadfast to their faith and culture in the modern world. The play castigates the Sikh upper classes and the intelligentsia as being indifferent to the progress and uplift of the downtrodden masses unlike the Western-educated elite who have taken the 'centre stage' in uplifting the masses (13).

Structurally, the play consists of 12 scenes which are episodic in nature and marked by abrupt shifts from one locale to the other comprising different sets of characters with only Lakhdatta Singh as the connecting element. Except for the first four and thereafter the last, the scenes have little connection with each other. In the tradition of Sanskrit drama, the play begins with a *prastavna* wherein the author addresses the audience or '*sajjan*' and makes it quite clear that the purpose of the play is not entertainment but to show reality and draw the attention of the reader towards the state of the Sikhs (Singh 13). Although the play is quite basic in its structure and plot, yet the playwright has tried to invest it with a few theatrical devices such as asides and soliloquy. Given its didactic nature, it also reads as a morality play at times with stock characters and situations. Grewal sees a deliberate rejection of Western dramatic framework and an 'adaptation' of Sanskrit traditions along with 'indigenous Punjabi features', and although he does not specify what these features are, one can surmise that he's referring to songs and the extracts from the Sikh scriptures (19). Though structurally the play has more valences with the Sanskrit dramatic tradition, however the influence of Western dramatic traditions on the play can't be negated completely either. The desire to usher in a new mode of representation for depicting contemporary Sikh life and social issues may in part stem from the impact of education as also a desire to awaken people to their reality through a genre other than novel and poetry.

The first scene set in a jungle opens with a *sant* (saint) bemoaning the lack of leaders in contemporary Sikh society and how they need a new leader to guide them. The onus for the same is thrust upon Raja Lakhdatta, a King of one of the princely states of Hindustan (as described in the play), a man who has lost his way in the material pleasures of the world and doesn't seem to have much actual authority as his people do not have faith in him. The *sant* appears in the court in scene two and casts a deep impression upon Lakhdatta Singh's mind at a point when he is reeling under existential dilemmas and dark forebodings about his future. The court scene also provides for some comic relief through the witticisms of the court jester cast in the vein of the *vidhushak* (clown) who satirises everyone, including the ministers and the *granthis* (Sikh priest versed in the scriptures). The King's search for spiritual guidance from the *sant* leads to his conviction that the

quam needs him, and he therefore announces his decision of temporarily leaving the court much to the shock of his ministers.

Over the next few scenes, the King goes incognito to see the state of his people who are shown trapped in various social, ethical and religious pitfalls. Addiction is the first social problem that he confronts when he comes across a group of opium addicts. The den owner informs Raja Lakhdata that the Sikhs give him the best business from amongst all the communities since the 'The Muslims have been awakened by Sir Syed' and have the favour of the government, the Hindus are wealthy and educated. 'For the rest it is the brave Khalsa who is the most valorous in these battlefields' (trans mine 31). The reference is to Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and the Aligarh Movement as well as the Arya Samaj movement which had introduced many social reforms in the Muslim and Hindu communities, respectively, to contrast them with the Sikhs who seem to be stuck in their drug-induced haze rather than progressing ahead. The emergence of a new world order and the necessity of keeping pace with progress appear to be lost on the new generation. Lakhdata Singh's attempts at trying to lead these young men back to their glorious values are futile as he is pushed away from the den by the addicts. The playwright tries to drive home the point that while earlier the Sikhs had well-defined enemies, the aimless and directionless present generation is its own enemy today. A strong binary is set up between the pure *panth* and the present impure generation.

Being a litterateur and writer himself, Bhai Vir Singh also makes certain strong statements on the role played by literature and the writer with respect to the larger community. In scene six, the King comes across a company of versifiers, the '*baint baaz*' who sing Waris Shah's *Heer* and compose poetry based on love and female beauty. Through Lakhdata Singh, the author criticises such poetry as being shallow and frivolous, 'Poetry has destroyed you, and you have destroyed the nation' (38). Although primarily a poet himself, Bhai Vir Singh states that the need of the hour is for heroic poetry and thoughts that inspire the Sikhs onto higher things rather than dulling their minds through insipid verses. He further comments, 'Waris Shah wrote *Heer*. Everyone is fond of *Heer*. How is the *Panth* to be saved?, No one is worried about the education of the *Panth*' (39). He sees the 'pure' art of poetry also corrupted by such poets (39). In keeping with the didactic tone of the play, a larger responsibility is thus expected of Punjabi literature in the face of changes in the social, political and religious spheres. The conscious rejection of secular poetry also points to the way in which literary tastes and reception were changing to accommodate more contemporary forms such as the novel and drama for purposes of reaching out to the masses.

The play is also critical of the rich Sikh aristocrats for their apathy and indifference towards the poor who are shown as resorting to conversion on account of their poverty. 'The rich are irresponsible the poor are burdened by poverty. There is no middle class in this *panth*. So how is there to be any

betterment?’ laments Lakhdatta Singh (trans mine, 47). According to J.S. Grewal, the author is primarily concerned with the moral awakening and enlightenment of the Sikh upper classes who would then ‘take up the cause of education among the Sikhs’ (17). However, the scene raises questions as Bhai Vir Singh cites only economic factors for the conversion of the Sikhs, thereby avoiding the role played by social factors such as caste discrimination in the case of conversions. For a play otherwise concerned with social reform, this lack of engagement with other social problems prevalent in society is striking.

The play also highlights the relative backwardness of the Sikh community as opposed to other religious communities. It depicts the corruption present amongst the *granthis* who are criticised at various places in the play: the court, the aristocrat’s house and the inn, stating that a primary reason for the people straying away from the fold of Sikhism was due to the lack of proper religious instruction by the *granthis*. This is brought in focus in scene eight where a *granthi* is accused of using the *daswand* or the tithe for his personal use and of turning the *dharamsala* which should have been a place for ‘educating the village boys’, into his personal dwelling. Ironically, the education of girls is not referred to, highlighting the near absence of women in the play as characters or even as points of reference. The *granthi*’s servant laments, ‘Sikhi has been destroyed, the hymns of missionaries play in every house, the Aryas have also influenced many, Sikhs have started cutting their hair’ (trans mine, 49). This scene emphasises the Singh Sabha’s mandate of bringing the Sikhs back into the fold of Sikhism. It is also reflective of the sense of competitiveness that was evinced amongst the various social movements in the face of religious conversions. Interestingly, even though it is the servant who tries to make the *granthi* and the reader realise the perceived ‘threat’ in the form of the proselytising mission of the missionaries and the return to Hinduism by many Sikhs under the influence of the Arya Samaj, neither he nor the other weaker sections have been given any agency in rectifying the situation. There is a sense of concern also regarding the research into the Sikh scriptures undertaken by the orientalist as the community itself shows a lack of initiative in researching, promoting and disseminating the philosophy and values of the Sikh faith. As the servant remarks to the *granthi*, ‘people can read English and set off in learning and researching on Guru Granth Sahib. If they do that, they don’t need you’ (50). The scene pushes for the message of the Gurus to be spread in Punjabi and not the language of the coloniser.

Scene nine depicts the infighting amongst various sects of Sikhism as well as amongst different communities as shown through the altercation between a *sant*, a *granthi*, a padre and a *pandit*. The *Pandit* is desirous of converting to Sikhism after a chance encounter with a Singh Sabha member who tells him about the spiritual peace offered by the Sikh faith. Referring to the Singh Sabhaites, the *granthi* comments, ‘They’re good people, they profess the faith and carry out a lot of propaganda, spread Sikhism, do a

lot of *sewa*, live a model lifestyle as well. However, their drawback is that they don't believe in caste and creed' (52). On this, a fight ensues between a self-professed *sant* and the *granthi*, exposing their shallow nature. The padre takes away the Pandit stating 'how will those who are not enlightened themselves, enlighten others?' (53). Lack of education, the existence of prejudices of caste and creed and narrow-mindedness emerge as challenges in the path of reformation and awakening for Lakhdata Singh and by extension the Singh Sabha.

Bemoaning the sorry state of his *panth*, the King recalls the sacrifices of the gurus, a strategy used by many playwrights of the time to instil a sense of nationalism and pride amongst the masses for their glorious past and heritage. While a strong sense of competitiveness prevails amongst the religious figures of different communities, there is no vilification of any community or even the padres who convert the Sikhs; instead, they are seen as communities who have progressed while the Sikhs have lagged. BVS launches a trenchant critique at the followers and leaders of the Sikh faith for having hollowed out what was once a strong and proud race. While he invokes the values and message of the Gurus to inspire the Sikhs, he also emphasises that riding on the glories of the past generations will not be enough for making their new place in a new world order characterised by education and progress. BVS imagines a state where the privileged classes work towards the general well-being of the society, the direction being provided by the King, and education being the panacea to all evils. However, the lower classes and the vulnerable sections are shown as passive victims rather than agents of change which limits their scope and role within the play and even the larger society. Although the play advocates change, reform and progress, it is difficult to surmise what sort of a future social or political system of governance is proposed for the masses as BVS doesn't reject or engage with the issue of colonial rule.

Scene ten marks a shift from the earlier scenes as it focuses on those marginalised, weaker sections of Sikh society who are seen to be suffering on account of lack of education and progress. Acknowledging his own faults as a king who was lost in material pleasures thereby ignoring his people, we finally see Lakhdata Singh drop his lengthy sermons and actively start on the path of leading his people out of this darkness. For a play that lacks any definite action or plot, the only time that Lakhdata Singh springs into action is when he sees an orphaned Sikh boy crying for help on being taken by the padre for conversion. Hearing the boy's sad tale of conversion as his only option in the face of poverty and hunger, Raja Lakhdata decides to take the boy's responsibility on himself. While this marks a defining moment of awakening for the Raja's character, yet at the same time the padre reprimands him and questions his newfound concern for the Sikh *panth* pointing that no one had cared for the *panth* when they had converted so many Hindu, Sikh and Muslim boys earlier. He also warns Lakhdata Singh of not reneging on his promise of taking care of the boy. This represents an

interesting aspect of the conversion issue as the Sikh upper and middle classes are held responsible for their apathy towards the vulnerable sections of the society, thereby allowing others to step in and convert them.

The play while replete with sundry characters lacks female characters except for a widow in scene eleven whom Lakhdata Singh saves from committing suicide. The widow represents the marginalisation of women after becoming widows as she is considered a burden by her family as well as that of her in-laws. The reformed King decides to take her under his wing in his new role as the saviour of his people. This is the only reference to women in the entire play, raising questions regarding the role envisioned for women in the larger context of the community. Scene twelve which is the closing scene takes us back to the court where the King calls for data and statistics from ‘all over Hindustan’ (70) to compare the state of Sikhs with other communities. The results are dismal as Sikhs fare badly on all fronts such as those of education and jobs but lead in vices and criminal activities. Poverty makes the Sikhs turn to dacoity and murder like common criminals. As a character remarks, ‘if the enemy is an outsider they get together and fight him. But if there is no cause outside, then they fight within. “One who is a khalsa fights every day”, either with foes or with friends’ (67). While people from other communities are seen as occupying higher positions, Sikhs are shown as engaged more in menial jobs on account of lack of education. The saint also tells Raja Lakhdata that only education can help the Sikh *quam* and his work should now be dedicated towards the spread of education in all spheres of life, ‘religious, scientific, technical and general’ (Grewal 1986, 566). Even though the play comments that Western education has distracted people with its glamour, yet there is an acceptance also of the merits of modern education and the realisation that in a changing world, only education can provide the community a foothold. Grewal writes that as a member of the Singh Sabha, Bhai Vir Singh ‘accepted western science and technology but rejected the ethical, religious and cultural values of the West. A certain degree of subversion is implied in this rejection. Bhai Vir Singh maybe seen as writing in reaction to colonial rule’ (20). At one point, the saint remarks that ‘Blinded by the glamour of western education, the self-knowledge of the Sikhs is today obscured by materiality. They are also closeted by the strength of other communities. Those capable of doing something are in the throes of illiteracy’ (Singh (1910) 2015, 26). He criticises and rejects the materiality of Western culture and education but towards the end the saint extols the benefits and virtues of modern education, one which is combined with religious instruction as well as the path forward for the Sikh *quam*:

Education has made all things possible in the world today,
as a result of this education the railways are plying today.
Those with knowledge have conquered water, wind, light....

(Trans mine 77)

Though the play makes oblique references to the colonial power, Bhai Vir Singh does not directly engage with the issue of colonialism except through pointed references to the growing reach of English. T.S. Gill writes that it is popularly held that writers like BVS and Puran Singh 'did not adopt any favourable attitude towards the colonial rule' and

found it below their dignity to portray colonialism and the structure of experience and feeling it had introduced into the Punjabi life, culture, ethos and thinking...a close look into their concerns, however, reveals beyond any doubt that implicit in their sublime indifference and utter disregard for colonialism was the acceptance they accorded to it under the burden of their heritage.

(440)

Gill sees this lack of political engagement as a problem in Bhai Vir Singh's works, which, though suffused with aesthetic and spiritual concerns, do not venture into an overt critique of colonial rule though he does refer to the orientalis, the presence of Western education and religious conversions in the play. Ganda Singh (1997) states that, 'The association of some European officials with Sikh educational programme in its initial stages was a constructive step taken by the leaders of the Singh Sabha movement for obvious reasons, and it proved to be doubly useful to the community' (xii). The play points that modern education is vital for progress in accordance with the new world; at the same time, it also seeks to keep the masses protected from its cultural impact by constantly drawing upon the values and traditions of Sikh life.

Conclusion

Commenting upon the nature and intent of the social movements, Linden observes, 'Significant to the Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyah moral languages was an urge to revive past times to cope with present conditions...the elitist reformers now felt impelled to reinterpret their sacred texts and cast them in modern scientific language' (132). The didactic theme or the message of the play is clearly the spread of education and the revival of the Sikh faith amongst the masses. It espouses the ideology of the Singh Sabha movement as the need of the hour by depicting the manner in which social movements had made inroads amongst their co-believers. BVS uses the platform of the play to portray the sorry state of the Sikhs, the competition amongst different religious groups, the issue of conversion and the lack of a responsible middle and upper Sikh class.

Commenting upon the socio-religious atmosphere of pre-independence Punjab, Ganda Singh (1997) states:

The Sikhs...on the one hand (had) to guard against the suspicious and repression of the government and on the other to protect their

community from being absorbed in the great Hindu majority...They were also economically backward when compared with the vast majority of Hindus. Afraid to be victimized as political aspirants or as sympathisers of the Kukas or of Maharaja Duleep Singh, some of them had gradually slunk back into the Hindu fold and, and for want of education and religious inspiration, they were being slowly lost to the Sikh community. With this, their existence as a separate people with a distinct identity was greatly endangered...The first imperative need of the Sikh community at this time, therefore was to educate and enlighten its masses in matters religious and social ...the leaders of the Singh Sabha movement, therefore wisely decided to devote their undivided attention to the spread of education among their masses with the help and co-operation of the Government, if possible.

(xi)

The play when read in the light of Ganda Singh's comments highlights the sense of threat that was being felt by certain members of the Sikh community. However, while the play depicts a similar situation and argues for education, BVS chooses to hold the community itself responsible for the rot that had set in and for its current state of malaise. While at one level there is the litterateur at work conscious of experimenting with a new literary genre in Punjabi, on the other hand, there is also the conviction of the Singh Sabhaite who emphasises upon the importance of education for a more enlightened *quam*, which will then not lag behind the others. It almost seems as though Raja Lakhdata is the king of the Sikhs alone and not the others as his concern only lies with Sikhs and not the other communities who are doing quite well in his kingdom. The presence of a Raja as a leader who will take the Sikhs onto the path of progress through education creates a sense of ambiguity regarding the nature of the political state envisioned under colonialism. The play is quite problematic in its treatment of social issues such as conversion, the status of women and the poorer sections of the society. The social order presented in the play is dominantly male and marginalises women in a play otherwise concerned with education and social reform. The lack of women as active or possible agents of social change in the play at a time when it was necessary to encourage them to come forward and partake of education renders it problematic in some respects. Coming to the concern with conversion, there is again no reference to other social factors such as caste discrimination which might also have contributed to conversion. The project of reform and education also seems lopsided in the context of the play as the *quam* refers dominantly to the male and upper-class Sikhs.

The play is an early attempt and therefore can't be judged as per modern standards; however, there are certain technical flaws, primarily those of a loose plot and weak characterisation, that need to be pointed out. It is marred by abrupt scene shifts, repetitiveness and limited action which mostly consists of Raja Lakhdata meandering confusedly in his conscience-stricken state till the

conversion of a young boy jolts him out of his inaction. Only the protagonist in the play has a name; the others are all nameless characters who are meant to represent the masses at large. This large assemblage of characters does not allow for the reader or audience to connect or relate to any one character as there is no character development or growth. Even in the case of Lakhdata Singh, there is hardly any growth of character that takes place through the length of the play. The sermonising gets quite tedious and repetitive at places; at the same time, it is important to note that despite a serious theme, the playwright tries to intersperse the play with humorous asides, stock situations such as disguise as well as songs. To give the play an element of theatricality, Bhai Vir Singh tries to incorporate some dialects and accents as well, for example, the *marwaris* who speak in their dialect, the padre who speaks anglicised Hindi. It is on account of these problems that the early modern plays such as Raja Lakhdata Singh have been disregarded as serious play writing attempts and the beginnings of Punjab drama generally associated with I.C. Nanda. Further, it can also be postulated that the genre was too young for the writer to fully exploit its political or subversive potential.

Notwithstanding these thematic and structural problems, a study of this play is important not only because it is one of the earliest plays in Punjabi but it also helps in understanding the various attitudes and impulses present in the socio-cultural landscape of colonial Punjab in the early twentieth century. It is reflective of Bhai Vir Singh's modernity and his vision regarding the genre. It stands on its own merit for depicting the problems afflicting the Sikh populace and in accepting the role of education linked with religious reform and instruction. The play is a departure from Bhai Vir Singh's larger oeuvre comprising novels, poems, tracts, etc., and was reprinted for the second time only in 1925 after its publication in 1910. Thereafter, the new edition is cited for the year 2015 as per the edition available at Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan (BVSSS). The print history is important because when compared to Bhai Vir Singh's other works especially *Sundri* ([1898] 2013), this does not seem to have enjoyed much popularity, leading to the speculation whether this was on account of the newness of the genre or the didactic theme, which does not glorify the Sikhs. The play is also representative of Bhai Vir Singh's engagement with modernity in terms of the deliberate choice of genre, the engagement with the issue of modern education and the depiction of the state of Sikhs in realistic terms. Through his experimentation with a new genre in Punjabi, Bhai Vir Singh attempts at reviving the feelings of nationalism in the Sikh *qaum*, while at the same time presenting a case for embracing modernisation through education with the Singh Sabha ideology as the driving force.

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7 Beyond the Past

Poetry as a Notation of the Present

Anne Murphy

Introduction¹

Bhai Vir Singh (1872–1957) was a major figure in the colonial and post-colonial literary and Sikh religious worlds of undivided, and then the Indian, Punjab. As described in the Introduction and chapters in this volume, he was active across a wide range of genres: he edited historical texts and produced extensive commentaries on them, such as his careful editing of and commentary on the multi-volume early nineteenth-century historiographical text the *Sūraj Granth* by Santokh Singh, which he completed from 1926 to 1934 – discussed here in a chapter by Jvala Singh – and Rattan Singh Bhangu’s historical account of the establishment of sovereign rule in Punjab by Ranjit Singh and other Sikh rulers, also from the early nineteenth century, the *Prachīn Panth Prakāsh* (which was published in its first edition in 1914). He also produced synthetic historical surveys on the lives of the Gurus, such as his *Srī Kalgīdhār Chamatkār* (1925) about the tenth and final Sikh Guru who lived in the seventeenth and very beginning of the eighteenth centuries, and *Srī Gurū Nānak* (1928), about the first Guru, who lived in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, discussed in this volume by Julie Vig (H. Singh 1972: 79, 82, 86; Vig this volume). In creative terms, he is credited with creating the first modern play in Punjabi, *Rājā Lakhdātā* (1910), and he wrote historical novels such as the foundational work *Sundarī* (which appeared in a serialized form and then as a novel, in 1898); *Satwañt Kaur* (in two parts, 1900 and 1927, and also originally serialized; H Singh 1972: 47; see Aurora and Malhotra, this volume) BVS 1968 [1918] & 2003 [1898], and other works. He played a foundational role in popular printing, for which he produced a wide range of works, through the vehicle of the Wazir-i-Hind Press, a lithograph press he started with his colleague Wazir Singh in 1892, and the *Khālāsā Samāchar*, a weekly periodical that is addressed in this volume in the chapter by Parneet K Dhillon and Jaspal K Dhanju.

The importance of the founding of the Press cannot be overstated since, as Harbans Singh tells us, “All of Bhai Vir Singh’s works were printed here”: novels, historical works, poems, etc. (1972: 30). In this way, his work in periodicals represents his work as a whole. This also connects it

to broader dynamics in colonial South Asia, where serials played a formative role across languages, as Jennifer Dubrow (2017) has explored in the case of early experimentation with the novel in Urdu; modernist literature more broadly must be understood in this context as well, as new work on “Modernism’s Print Cultures” has asserted (Hammill and Hussey 2016). The Khalsa Tract Society (hereafter KTS) followed the Press a year later, and 90 per cent of the compositions published by the Society were written by Bhai Vir Singh, albeit most anonymously (H Singh 1972: 32). The KTS was known for its production of Sikh identitarian literature, particularly in association with the Singh Sabha movement, a dispersed and multi-located group of organizations that were led by prominent associations in Amritsar and Lahore; there were significant differences among these different associations but as a whole they were generally concerned with issues of definition and reform, in keeping with the increasingly agonistic dynamics among religious communities in the opening of the twentieth century in colonial India – politicized by aspects of British governance that linked nascent forms of representation to religious identity – and embracing internal change and definition in relation to the political needs of the moment. As Denis Matringe has noted, the principal weapon that the movement wielded was the written word (“Son arme principale était l’écrit”; Matringe 1996: 43). The KTS, however, also published a range of other materials: texts for children, recipes, etc. (H. Singh 1972: 31–32). This is in keeping with the tenor of publications in this period more broadly: Francesca Orsini has observed the diversity of form and type in Hindi-language printed work in the early twentieth century and we see a parallel phenomenon in Punjabi (Orsini 2002: 31). It also reflects the diverse proclivity of authors: individual authors engaged in the production of diverse kinds of work, such as reformist, traditional literary compositions (such as the production of versions of *qissa* narrative texts) and pragmatic/utilitarian works (Murphy 2012: 130–131). KTS did not have the full range of some periodicals, given the specific interests it espoused, but it is important to remember that it too was not univocal. And, again, the KTS material provided the ground for later, book-length published work: *Sri Kalgidhar Chamatkar* (1925) and *Sri Guru Nanak Chamatkar* (1928) drew together shorter material published as tracts by the KTS (H. Singh 1972: 86).

One genre that Bhai Vir Singh also published widely in his tracts and newspapers were short poetic works that he also later collected into free-standing volumes. This chapter seeks to examine this dimension of Bhai Vir Singh’s literary work, which has been less discussed in the English-language scholarship but which garnered significant accolades and attention within his lifetime. It is, indeed, in his body of poetic work that Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh argues that “Bhai Vir Singh’s art is at its zenith” (2017: 459); it is what Harbans Singh called his “permanent calling” (H Singh, 1972: 67). It was Vir Singh’s final collection of poetry, the compilation *Mere Sāiān Jīo* (“My Beloved,” 1953), that earned him the national Sahitya Akademi

award in 1955, in the first year that the award was ever granted, and a little over a year before his death (“Akademi Awards” n.d.). Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh sees Vir Singh’s earlier (discussed here) and later work as largely continuous – sharing “not only powerful motifs and themes, but also a fundamental spiritual longing” (2008: xxiv). She does note that his final publication is distinguished by its work of diverse rhyming schemes and length, breaking and bending poetic conventions, such that “it seems that in his final publication Bhai Vir Singh lets go of all conventional patterns and lets his unconscious take over completely” (2008: xxi). In this, this late work perhaps reflected the influence of a newly energized experimentalist movement in Punjabi poetry, which challenged the dominance of strictly progressive literary positioning that had become dominant in modern Punjabi literary domains, although it would be a mistake to see these two positions as mutually exclusive, since interests in realism and experience, and a critical engagement with the idea of “tradition,” animated both (Matringe 1995, Mufti 2004; Murphy 2018).

In the 1920s and 1930s, when Bhai Vir Singh first drew together his poetic works for publication, his younger contemporaries embraced, Denis Matringe has argued, “a great freedom of expression and a relation of immediacy with the life of poets and the historical and social situation” (1995: 190). Matringe argues that this orientation of this body of work – by authors such as Puran Singh (1881–1931), Charan Singh Shahid (1891–1935), Dhani Ram Chatrik (1876–1954), and Devinder Satyarthi (1908–2003) – sets it apart from that of Bhai Vir Singh.² Given Bhai Vir Singh’s religious commitments, Surjit Dulai describes him as exhibiting “a partially modern sensibility... seeking an Absolute transcendental reality as an answer to the problems of the empirical world” (Dulai 1974: 162). Similarly, Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal noted that BVS’s devotion to Sikh thought and religious philosophy “submerged the thinker in him, and bound him down to what he inherited in the Sikh tradition” (1992: 110). Such critique is consistent with a broader one, discussed below, regarding the transcendent “unmodernity” of the lyric poetic form, which was the poetic form favoured by Bhai Vir Singh (Thain 2016: 4). We can perhaps appreciate more today the complexity, however, of both Bhai Vir Singh’s position, and that of the lyric form that he wrote in. This, in turn, can enhance our understanding of Vir Singh’s work in ideological terms, complicating the dominant Singh Sabha/reformist narrative that, while certainly accurate in many ways, does not account for his full body of work and the complexity of his participation in the Punjabi-language literary world that he was so important to establishing. In short, only part of the story is told that way. This also, it will be argued, allows us to reconnect Vir Singh’s work to that of his contemporaries.

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh has contributed significantly to our understanding and experience of Bhai Vir Singh’s poetic work in English with two important collections: a book-length collection of Vir Singh’s poems

(Kaur Singh 2008) and another collection on lyrical poetry in Punjabi from the time of the Gurus to the present (Kaur Singh 2012). I draw on these beautiful translations here – particularly those from *Trel Trupke* or “Dew Drops” (1921), a collection of poems composed from 1909 to 1921, as presented in Kaur Singh’s 2008 Sahitya Akademi book – and augment them with a small number of poems from the later collection, *Bijlāñ de Hār* (Wreaths of Lightning”) from 1927, with compositions translated both by Kaur Singh and by myself. Focus is thus on work published in the 1920s, as Bhai Vir Singh moved away from historical fiction and the play form, but continued his historical criticism, as discussed below. Through an analysis of a small number of exemplary poems – in this short chapter, appropriate to the brevity of the lyric form that is its focus – we seek to account for Vir Singh’s poetry as a body of work in its own terms (rather than as a shadow of the work that has to date received greater scholarly attention in English, particularly the novel), but also in dynamic relation to these other various genres that Vir Singh worked within, towards a more integrative understanding of his body of work as a whole, and poetry’s place within it.

Poetry and its place in Bhai Vir Singh’s work

Harbans Singh has argued that “poetry and scholarship” were Bhai Vir Singh’s “lifeblood and he sustained himself on these throughout his long years” after he turned from fiction and play-writing in the 1910s and 1920s (H Singh 78). “Scholarship,” here, refers to his editing and commentarial work, which he continued alongside his poetic work, producing definitive versions of some of the most important of early Sikh texts and commentary on Sikh scripture through the latter years of his career. (He also continued to produce tracts in association with the KTS, representing a third major domain of activity.) It is the juxtaposition of historical textual work with poetic work that is most intriguing. There are contrasting, and yet also perhaps interconnected temporalities, that are expressed in these choices. Their co-production, I believe, can tell us something.

It has been noted that Bhai Vir Singh received literary accolades in relation to his poetic work. It is here that he emerges as a modernist writer; as Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal put it, he “upheld the torch of modernism in Punjabi literature” (1992: 109). This is not to say that he did not inaugurate new forms and embrace new topics in other genres: he is widely credited, for example, with initiating the novel form in Punjabi. It is also important not to see any one genre in isolation: there are strong ties among Bhai Vir Singh’s work across genres. For example, there are elements of direct speech in his first-serialized first novel *Sundari*, and it also cites historical evidence from Sikh historiographical sources, grounding it in a historical genre that Bhai Vir Singh also made his mark in (Murphy 2012: 127–148). Along similar lines, *Kambdī Kalāi*, “The Trembling Wrist,” published in 1933, is deeply devotional in tone and also traces a kind of

history of the Gurus as it moves through different aspects of the Gurus lives and teachings. This clearly resonates with Bhai Vir Singh's historiographical concerns, expressed in, for example, in the *Chamatkar* and *Kalgidhar* volumes mentioned above and discussed in this volume by Vig. Along similar lines, Denis Matringe describes the extended poem *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* (1905) as a "long narrative poem of mystical quest" that is centrally concerned with "the definition of a new Sikh identity," linking it to Vir Singh's more identitarian work (1996, 39). *Rāṇā Sūrat Singh* also featured poetic innovation in terms of prosody, style, and language (Shackle 1998: 189–192, 198), so it too was both concerned with the formations of "tradition" and innovation. There are also strong affinities between Vir Singh's historically oriented work – his historical criticism and editing – and his work in the creative genres of novel and play: the past was the stage upon which his creative narratives unfolded, alongside his scholarly work. Even poetic work too could betray the logic of historical fiction, such as in the early modern portrayal that manifests in *Rana Surat Singh*. The past, therefore, was a preoccupation, across generic distinctions. We cannot therefore separate Singh's work simply in terms of genre, nor underestimate the complexity of the formation of each in relation to others.

Bhai Vir Singh's lyrical poetic work, however, is quite distinctive in form and content from the other genres he worked in, although some features of later poetry, such as Bhai Vir Singh's preoccupation with the natural world, are present in *Rana Surat Singh* (Kaur 2020; Kaur Singh 2008, xxi; 2012: 125; Shackle 1998: 198–200). These distinctive features of his poetic works, first, need to be accounted for in their own terms, and second, can allow for appreciation of neglected dimensions of his other works. As has been mentioned, his collections of poetic works drew together poems published over time in his periodical publications and these collections took various forms, sometimes republishing work that appeared in other collections, as he describes in his introduction to *Lahirān de Hār* ("Wreaths of Waves" 1921). Collections of short poetic works include *Dil Tarang* ("Passion of the Heart" 1920), *Trel Trupke* ("Dew Drops"), and *Lahirān de Hār*, the latter two both published in 1921. *Maṭak Hulāre* ("Swinging flirtation"), which focuses on the beauty of Kashmir, followed in 1922 and *Bijlān de Hār* ("Wreaths of Lightning") in 1927, which Bhai Vir Singh described as containing "*vikolittre khyāl... cāhe nikkīān kavītā han te chāhe lammeriān*" ("solitary, isolated thoughts... whether they be short poems or long" (V. Singh 1972: 87). These were followed by a work mentioned earlier, entitled *Kambdī Kalāi*, "The Trembling Wrist," that was published in 1933, and which provided directions on how the works should be sung, firmly asserting the relationship of the work to sung performance. A collection of short poems, *Lehar-Hulāre* ("Surging Wave"), was published in Devanagari in 1946 and Gurmukhi in 1948; *Vir Rachnāvalī* ("Vir's Collected Works") appeared in Devanagari in 1951. His final collection of poetry was his final work, *Mere Sāiān Jīo* ("My Beloved"), which appeared in 1953 (Shan 1973).

Key here is the genre of the lyric. It was into this form, Harbans Singh tells us, that Bhai Vir Singh “poured his fervent vision of beauty and the tremor of joy it released inside him” (H. Singh 1972: 67). It was, he argues, an innovative genre in Punjabi, filled “with personal intuition and inspiration and responsive to the mystery of life and Nature” (H. Singh 1972: 68). We should be wary, of course, of too easily applying this term, the “lyric,” to Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry, to force it to adhere to a definition that may emerge outside of it. At the same time, it is useful to consider its valences. Aamir Mufti has suggested this with reference to the place of the lyric in Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s poetry – highlighting the form’s “intensely personal contemplation of love and of the sensuous” – as reflecting not simply the mobilization of a traditional form for radical ends but instead that the form made visible “a dialectic of self and other in which the subject and object of desire not so much become one as simultaneously come near and become distant, exchange places, are rendered uncertain” (Mufti 2004: 246–247). Mufti argues that “what the concept of lyric makes possible is the translation, the passage, of Faiz’s poetry from a literary history that is specifically Urdu into a critical space for the discussion of Indian literary modernity as a whole” (Ibid., 255); it is in this spirit that this discussion of the lyric as a distinctive form in Bhai Vir Singh finds its footing, in relation to a broader history of the form.

The short lyric, in general, is notoriously difficult to define: as Heather Dubrow has noted, “the history of the criticism of lyric offers all too many examples of the perils of positing as normative a characteristic that dominates in a given period or author” (2007: 4). It has been used broadly to describe Sufi and other works, in the South Asian context, such as in Christopher Shackle’s 2015 volume of “Sufi Lyrics.” It is also a form that has a troubled relationship with modernism: as Marion Thain has noted, “The story of poetic modernity is often one of a move away from the lyric genre” (Thain 2016: 2). Werner Wolf identifies several features that are helpful for a general sense of what the term “lyric” can (but does not always) describe: such works have oral/performative nature (with strong links to song, as in South Asia – although as Thain (2013, 2) notes, also a strong connection to textuality in some contexts); brevity; self-reflexivity; exhibition of a “seemingly unmediated consciousness or agency,” a kind of “lyric persona” (Wolf 2003, 70) and “individual perspective” (Ibid., 71); demonstration of a “state of consciousness” rather than narration (Ibid., 72), and a lack of “‘realistic’ referentiality” (Ibid., 73). The problem of the lyric for modernity, Thain notes, has been its “association with transcendent aspirations” (2016: 7). For Mufti, some of these core elements reveal the power of the form in a colonial and post-colonial context. The idea of the divided self is at the centre of Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s works along these lines: for Mufti, this reveals a “truth of the self [that] is... contradictory, tense, and [an] antagonistic reality,” where the suffering of the self can act as an expression of political and social division (Mufti 2004: 247, 249).

This suffering, he continues, “echoes in lyric terms what is already present everywhere in popular experience, even if in ways that are muted, less than conscious, and fragmentary” in the Partitioned Punjab (Ibid., 262).

Faiz is of course a later and very different writer from Bhai Vir Singh and the purpose of this chapter is not to equate them. What does the lyric comprise in Bhai Vir Singh’s work? What does Bhai Vir Singh achieve in *his* use of the form? Thain has noted that critics once praised a move towards the narrative and the dramatic as indicative of a burgeoning modernity, rejecting “Romantic interiority” (Thain 2016: 2). (In this rendering, again, the lyric is singularly anti-modern.) Bhai Vir Singh, however, moves in a different direction, towards the lyric and away from the novel and the play, by the third decade of the twentieth century. Why is this the case? If, as the scholarly consensus on Bhai Vir Singh would suggest, he was primarily interested in identitarian and didactic concerns, why would he move away from these two genres, which seem so well suited to these domains of activity, these ways of telling stories that have a clear purpose? As has been mentioned above, such story-telling has been seen as an expression of Bhai Vir Singh’s “traditional” and reformist nature, a nature that is seen to define him. We would do well, I think, to interrogate this assumption. Such a move may indicate the different story of poetry in South Asia, where narrative did not displace the centrality of poetry as a popular form of literature, in contrast to the British case (Thain 2016: 31–32). It may, however, also indicate something important about the lyric as a form, as Mufti suggests in different terms with reference to Faiz, and the lyric’s complex engagement with modernity.

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh argues that Vir Singh used a “poetic strategy to evoke, elucidate and expand the Sikh scriptural message” (2008: xiv). As such, he “grasped the Guru Granth, and made it diaphanous and alive for his readers” (Ibid.). Kaur Singh ably explicates these religious and spiritual dimensions of Vir Singh’s poetic work, drawing out deep connections with Sikh scripture. Other critics have more broadly asserted the ties of the work to bhakti, or devotionism, more broadly (Talib et al., 1976: xx); as Karine Schomer (1984: 215) has noted, “the study of Indian literature... has tended either to adopt *in toto* the various traditional Indian modes of literary analysis, or to reject them entirely in favour of contemporary western standards of evaluation and judgment” – in this vein, attempts to analyse South Asian modern lyrical poems more broadly with reference to traditional *rasa* or aesthetic theory have “meant little more than seeking to determine the ‘dominant mood’ of given poems” (Schomer 1984: 215). The reading here seeks a middle path between these two poles, with appreciation of Vir Singh’s engagement with Sikh scripture and religious experience but greater attention to the literary context of his time, and the relationship of Vir Singh’s poetic works to his other work. The key to the reading pursued here is the experience of temporality that emerges in this body of lyrical poetry and what this temporality can do to complicate our

understanding of the project of being, and its location in time, that Bhai Vir Singh engages with in his work as a whole.

Vir Singh's lyric

The lyric as a description of Bhai Vir Singh's short poems highlights the poetry's focus on experience, personal and intimate. As his recent interpreter, Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, argues, "he incites his readers to refine their senses so that they can have a metaphysical insight into the singular reality of the cosmos" (2008, xxiv). At the same time, the work allows readers to "perceive the infinite beauty in *material* phenomena" (Kaur Singh 2008: xxv) in the everyday, in that which is before them. Immediacy and change, then, are recurrent topics, across a wide range of motifs. We see this in the following poems, provided here as examples of this broader approach:

Dew and Sun

On grass I stay, says the dew,
 All eyes I am;
 Longing for you I welled up
 And water, sheer water, I became –
 Now a drop of desire
 With nothing of me!
 O come from your celestial seat –
 I'm spread at your feet to hold you tight.
 (translated by Kaur Singh;
 Kaur Singh 2008: 7; 2012: 122)

Rhythm of the Melody

A tender tune arose,
 And stood by me;
 It shot a spasm,
 Of ferocious velocity
 I vibrated into ecstasy –
 Dreaming in transcendent colours;
 Joyous waves from the heavens above,
 Immerse me in a timeless zone!
 (translated by Kaur Singh;
 Kaur Singh 2008: 36)

Here, we see the constitution of the poetic subject: ecstatic and vulnerable, transcendent and immanent. We see invocations of more traditional poetic motifs in his poetry as well, such as *viraha*, the pain of separation – "Your Name was lodged forever on my tongue –/Though you walked

away;/Your devotion occupied my eyes, –/Instructed by your will” (Kaur Singh 2008: 39). Even here, it is the immediacy, the relentless present-ness of the poetry, that strikes one. This is an altogether different temporality from the concerns of *Sundari*, which sought to engage the past to feed the present in a didactic, strategic mode (Murphy 2012: ch. 4).

There are also ways that the expressions of the personal and the transformative that we perceive in his work, in turn, can be seen to resonate with other aspects of his work, particularly his concern for religious experience and conversion. This allows us to see these concerns, as expressed in prose works like the novel, as not only inflected with a concern for identity – that is, the well-attested use of conversion as a tool within the agonistic discourses over identity in colonial rule (see Malhotra’s chapter in this volume). Instead, Bhai Vir Singh’s preoccupation with personal transformation calls upon us to examine again his treatment of conversion as an intimate, internal change, and to understand this feature of his work in other texts, perhaps, in a domain beyond identity alone (as much as identity is also configured in relation to it). We can see how conversion is linked to personal transformation in *Sundari* and can see a parallel in the portrayal of Fatima’s attraction to Sikhism in the novel *Satwant Kaur*, and particularly the transformation in her nature through recitation of scripture: the text effects a personal transformation, intimate and internal (*Satwant Kaur*, 33; Murphy 2012: 140–141, 140, fn. 136, Malhotra’s chapter in this volume). This poetic work, in short, may help us to see these other works, such as the novel, in more plural terms.

We also see engagement with time itself, as a subject, signalling the importance of temporality itself within this body of work.

Today

Sip it today, sip it now
 Keep on sipping
 From the cup of primal nectar
 Don’t take your lips away.
 Sip it always and get high.
 Its ecstasy will not wane;
 Who knows about tomorrow?
 Soon we may be bones and ash.
 (translated by Kaur Singh;
 Kaur Singh 2008: 21)

Wait

My beloved told me, “I will come by midday.”
 Lunchtime came, and there was no beloved!
 A message was sent: “I will come by evening.”
 Evening time came, and the beloved did not come.

Counting the moments, the night passed.
The dawn broke but the beloved not come.
The clouds gathered and the rain began,
But still yet the beloved has not come!

(From *Bijilān de Hār*: V. Singh 1972:
87; unless otherwise indicated, translated
by A. Murphy)

Time

I made so many requests, but
Time wouldn't listen to anything.
Grabbing, pulling it along the surface,
Time slid away, on the edge.
I couldn't stop it.
That which I stopped, broke through.
It flowed quickly,
Jumping the side of the riverbank
Yes! Take care of this "Time" today,
Let it succeed; time is flying.
It does not know how to alight.
That which gone, does not return.

(In the voice of a woman, from
Bijilān de Hār: V. Singh 1972: 87)

High, Now

The memory of "that which has passed"
eats at our bones.
Fear of "that which will come"
finishes off that which went.
Thought of the fleeting moment of "now"
keeps gnawing at us.
"Went," "goes," "going":
A whole lifetime is wasted.
"Memory," "fear" and "thought":
there is always time and eternity
Taking these as three separate times, in error,
Find their place in "Now, high"

(From *Bijilān de Hār*: V. Singh 1972: 87)

Time is of course an aspect of the poem as a form, in itself: in its reading – the beginning and end of recitation – and in the lyrical form, in its brevity. The attention to performance given within *Kambdī Kalāi*, "The Trembling Wrist" (1933), asserts the special relationship of the poetic form to time in that context, accompanied by music.

The invocation of themes of the narrative *qissa* tradition represents another engagement with time, bringing the seemingly timelessness of these narratives to life through the portrayal of episodes from these stories in present-est terms. A focus on such episodes is a common way of invoking these stories, as Farina Mir's (2010) work on modern forms of the *qissā* has shown, but here such episodes emerge in a way that plays with time and timelessness. Indeed, Vir Singh invokes Ranjha with a kind of futurity, as well:

Still Ranjha

Our Ranjha lives in Takht Hazare,
He never leaves his village;
He pierces Heer with longing
Who is far away in Jhang Sial;
He will neither visit nor invite,
He draws her with his melodious flute;
He stays still by the waters,
Will he be disappointed? Will he be blessed?
(translated by Kaur Singh;
Kaur Singh 2008: 11)

Desire for the Beloved

The cowgirls longing for Krishna
That people speak of,
Sassi writhing for her Punnu
That the desert sands record
Heer's angst for Ranjha
Or Majnun's sickness –
These do not display love;
These hide a deep mystery.
Oh formless One! Isn't this the desire
You ignited at the beginning of time?
Is this not the spark
You set in every heart?
Our desire to meet you
Is our longing from you,–
When your mystery strikes us
We become crazy for you!
(translated by Kaur Singh;
Kaur Singh 2012: 122)

Vir Singh was not alone in exploring the domain of the *qissā* and particularly that of the thwarted lovers Hir and Ranjha in modernist terms, as

Matringe (1995: 204) has shown: poets from the first half of the twentieth century “made of use of that legend in order to formulate symbolically a social or religious message.” In Puran Singh’s hands, for example, Matringe argues that the legend in poetic form “is full of emotion and softness, and though it, the imaginary world of the Panjabis directed towards an unadorned mysticism which can be suitable for any sincere believer” (Matringe 1995: 206). This resonates with Vir Singh’s rendering of the *qissā* in the lyric form.

A crisis in temporality

The reading engaged here provides a glimpse of a different vision that accompanies the identitarian concerns expressed in other locations in Bhai Vir Singh’s body of work. Arvind Mandair’s 2006 critique of Bhai Vir Singh’s exegesis of Sikh scripture – represented in this volume in an updated form – notes its adherence to Western notions of monotheism, closing out possibilities inherent in non-dualist thought. Openness to such thought, however, emerges in Bhai Vir Singh’s poetic work, in its exploration of time and a deeply experienced present. This provides a new purchase on the broader discourse of “identity” that Bhai Vir Singh has been linked to and connects the work to a broader world: as Gautam Liu has suggested, the tenor of Vir Singh’s poetic work resonates with the Chhayavad movement in Hindi – described by Harish Trivedi (2003: 990) as an “allegedly romantic-mystical-ethereal-escapist school of poetry” – which flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, coinciding with the emergence of the poetic work of Bhai Vir Singh under consideration here (see also Schomer 1983, 1984).³ Indeed, Schomer’s description of the movement as combining “traditional and modern subject matter, the devotional stance of self-surrender and the romantic stance of self-assertion, the mood of rapturous abandon and that of calm reflection” possesses striking parallels with Vir Singh’s lyrics (Schomer 1984: 220). Chhayavad, too, was criticized in its time for exhibiting a “romantic escapism in the midst of the mounting nationalist struggle for independence” (Trivedi 2003: 998); this is reminiscent of Dulai’s assertion of Vir Singh’s “partial” modernity, cited above. We can also see greater congruence too, in this work, with that of Bhai Vir Singh’s Punjabi-writing contemporaries, examined by Matringe, seeing elements of the “personal and spiritualistic interpretation of Sikhism” that Matringe sees in Puran Singh’s work, for example, in Vir Singh’s lyrical work, too (Matringe 1995: 193).

Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh notes in her 2008 translation of Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry that “clearly, he is not developing or debating any theses or arguments here; the infinite surplus within seems to burst forth – delicate and shifting like dewdrops” (2008, xx). Certainly this is true. But perhaps he is indeed engaged in a kind of argument, but one that is not resolved in the representation of the past, and within an argument about identity – although I have argued elsewhere that even that more identitarian

engagement with the past is more complex than is often allowed, such as in his signature novel, *Sundari* (Murphy 2012: 141–145). It is in that critical space of the lyric that we see space for movement, to the beyond that lies within, and for that which moves beyond the identity that otherwise Bhai Vir Singh was so committed to crafting in his writing. The crisis in temporality – and the self – in the lyric perhaps allowed this, representing a moment of transcendence both within and beyond identity. We need not see these positions as opposed.

To return to Mufti, whose engagement with lyric is productive to think with, “The functioning of lyric in Faiz’s writing as a whole is as an abrupt flash of memory – not a fully formed recollection but rather an instantaneous sensation, of the self in motion, in dialogue with an other that is, uncannily, also self” (Mufti 2004: 267). Vir Singh’s engagement with the lyric is not identical to what we see in Faiz, whose historical emergence in a later moment in late colonial India, and with intense prominence at a crucial time in post-colonial Pakistan, entails a different set of concerns.⁴ The question Mufti sees animating Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s work – “What is the nature of the modern (Indian) self?” (Ibid., 271) – however, does find its footing in a reading of Bhai Vir Singh’s poetry, as well. In Bhai Vir Singh, too, the lyric allows for a “is a refusal to accept the terms of this fixing of identity and an attempt to put the self in motion” (Ibid., 272), in its celebration of non-duality and mystical embrace. This position stands in striking – and unresolved, fragmentary, and sometimes contradictory – tension with his other more identitarian and historically oriented work. The difference in the political and social possibility of the lyric in the hands of these two authors is grounded in the difference of the historical moment that each writes from: for Bhai Vir Singh, in the 1920s and 1930s, in the heyday of identitarian mobilization, but before its articulation in clearer, and ultimately traumatic, political terms in the 1940s. It was a time of the transformation of the mystical: among Urdu writers, Nile Green has identified a “new concern for poetic no less than literary morality that featured so prominently in both Urdu literary criticism and religious writing in the late nineteenth century” whereby “morally conservative idioms... eschewed the sensual metaphors of older Urdu and Persian tradition”; such work, however, still functioned as a “poetry of mystical experience” (Green 2010: 299, 301). Mystical experience, then, could go in multiple directions in these decades at the close of the nineteenth, and opening of the twentieth, centuries. This occurred in a moment prior to the crisis of Partition that shaped Faiz’s engagement of the lyric form. Thus, Trivedi (2003: 998) has argued for Chhayavad that “however sugar-coated its intensely lyrical mode might occasionally be...[it] remained a salutary, vitalizing pill for those embattled times.” The lyric was called to a certain task at this juncture in time, in Bhai Vir Singh’s work, as in others.

Bhai Vir Singh’s lyrical poetry integrates past and future, and celebrates immediacy and the personal in striking contrast to the preoccupation with

the past that is articulated in much of his other work. The contradiction between these two modes is not easily resolved. This aspect of Bhai Vir Singh's literary life has been occluded in much of the scholarship on him, and we scholars have turned away from reading that which eludes (or surpasses?) a strictly identitarian reading. In more literary terms, there is a tendency to disregard his poetic work as literary modernist work; in this, treatment of his work has much in common with the interpretation of the lyric in the late nineteenth century/early twentieth century, which according to Thain "fares badly under readings searching for the 'authenticity' of high modernism" (2016: 7). Vir Singh's poetry does not read well in such a light, either. This has occluded its reading. This dismissal of the work, however, also indicates something more: our own failure to read and to understand the complex position that Vir Singh writes from. If so, it is parallel to a broader failure to read modern Punjabi literature as a whole, by we who read in Punjabi. In so doing, we miss the other inhabitations of the world that this literature offers, not just for Bhai Vir Singh.

Notes

- 1 Earlier versions of this chapter were presented in a panel at the inaugural meeting of the *Canadian South Asian Studies Association/Association Canadienne d'études sud-asiatiques* (CSASA/ACESA), part of the Annual Congress of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 12 May 2022, and at the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg, 25 May 2022. I am grateful to fellow panel members and the audience at CSASA/ACESA; to all present in Heidelberg, particularly Hans Harder, Philipp Zehmisch, and Gautam Liu, for their insights; to Jvala Singh and Julie Vig for their reading of the chapter in draft form; to Anshu Malhotra for her insightful queries; and to Asma Qadri for always enlightening discussion of my translations.
- 2 Matringle also notes that the social positions of these authors, from the emergent professional class of colonial India, distinguish them from Vir Singh, who hailed from an established, elite family.
- 3 On this movement, see <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/01glossaries/busch/chayavad.htm>. The Chhayavad movement was noted for its Sanskritized language, representing a significant departure from Vir Singh's embrace of a relatively accessible and unadorned Punjabi language.
- 4 Mufti too highlights the particular historical conditions that Faiz represents (2004: 273).

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8 Intertextuality and Reception History

Connecting Bhai Vir Singh’s *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* to *Gurbilās* Literature¹

Julie Vig

Note on transliteration

The final short vowel (a) is omitted when modern Punjabi is transliterated, whereas it is included when Brajbhasha is transliterated.

Whenever the *gurmukhī* symbol *addhak* is used on top of a consonant, the length of that consonant is doubled and is transliterated as follows: ਪੱਤਾ (pattā): leaf.

Nasalization in *gurmukhī* represented by two symbols *ṭippī* and *bindī* are transliterated following Shackle’s system here²:

ਸੰਕ	saṅka	(similarly	ṅ	before	kh	g	gh	ṅ)
ਸੰਚ	saṅca	(similarly	ṇ	before	ch	j	jh	ṇ)
ਸੰਟ	saṅṭa	(similarly	ṇ	before	ṭh	ḍ	ḍh)	
ਸੰਤ	santa	(similarly	n	before	th	d	dh	n s)
ਸੰਪ	sampa	(similarly	m	before	ph	b	bh	m)

Final nasal sounds represented by the *ṭippī* or the *bindī* are transliterated following the IAST and are indicated by the symbol ṁ. For example: ਗੁੰ(nūṁ) and ਤੰ(tāṁ).

Gurbilās texts and the narratives they contain about the lives of the Sikh Gurus are well anchored in the imaginary of Sikhs today, shaping the way they remember the past and interact with the present. While research on interactions between *gurbilās* texts produced between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth century has been conducted to various degrees by scholars such as Purnima Dhavan (2009, 2011a), Louis Fenech (2000, 2008), Surjit Hans (2005), and Anne Murphy (2007, 2012a, 2012b, 2018) the history of the reception of these texts beyond the nineteenth century has not been fully researched.³ To trace the reception of *gurbilās* literature as a whole would be a laborious task as it would require analysing every possible interaction that connects *gurbilās* texts and their narratives—oral or

written—to various readerships across history. My goal here is to address one example: a variety of intertextually related narratives of the battle of Bhangani produced between the late seventeenth and the twentieth centuries. This single example represents the beginning of a reception history of *gurbilās* literature. This selective reading of texts produced over the course of three centuries does not intend to capture an essential meaning shared by all texts that would reveal a “historical truth” of the battle but rather to acknowledge the presence of a multiplicity of readings and interpretations of a same narrative throughout history with the goal of revealing questions and concerns that different authors and readerships may have had at specific points in time. Arvind Mandair has argued that Bhai Vir Singh, and other scholars belonging to the colonial reformist movement Singh Sabha, contributed to disseminating a “monopolizing interpretation of Sikh tradition” (Mandair 2006, 647) and “helped to crystallize a new and distinctive way of representing the central teaching of the Adi Granth” (Mandair 2006, 648). This monopolizing interpretative process of Sikh scriptures finds its parallel in regard to historiography (Murphy 2012a). For instance, Bhai Vir Singh’s interpretation of Guru Gobind Singh’s life has broader reach today in popular circles than early *gurbilās* texts, probably in part since Bhai Vir Singh uses a more widely accessible register of modern Punjabi rather than Brajbhasha. Reading texts diachronically allows us to access a wide range of interpretations and this multiplicity of interpretations not only reveals a richer texture in our understanding of the past but also sheds light on the specific historical circumstances in which each version of these texts was written. This is not to say that meaning lies strictly in the eyes of the readers, the same way that meaning is not intrinsically embedded within texts waiting to be discovered. Each text that is part of a literary tradition is more or less regulated by rules which sets a “horizon of expectations” shaping the reception of that text.⁴ But a literary tradition is not the only factor that comes into play in the reception of a text. The historical context in which the text is received also affects its reading and interpretation. Thus, when eighteenth-century Kuir Singh reads or hears the *Bacittar Nāṭak*, he interprets it according to a different “horizon of expectations” than twentieth-century Bhai Vir Singh. In addition, each author of *gurbilās* texts is part of a “chain of receptions” (Jauss 1978) in the sense that they are part of a literary tradition that precedes them historically (or that exists contemporarily) and which shapes their interpretations of literary works preceding them as well as their own production of literature. To better understand the life of *gurbilās* texts beyond the nineteenth century, we have to take into account earlier *gurbilās* texts.

The goal of this chapter is to examine how notions of intertextuality and reception history unfold in a Sikh literary context by examining formal and thematic interactions of Bhai Vir Singh’s *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* (2015 [1925]) with three *gurbilās* texts produced at both ends of the eighteenth century: the *Bacittar Nāṭak* (late seventeenth century, attributed to Guru

Gobind Singh), Sainapati's *Gur Sobhā* (ca. 1708), and Kuir Singh's *Gurbilās Patshāhī Das* (both late eighteenth century). A broad analysis of how these texts portray an important battle of Sikh history, the battle of Bhangani (dated to 1688), illustrates how the various historical circumstances of the seventeenth to twentieth centuries shaped the modes and content of historical representation of the Sikh past at different points in time. It also sheds light on the life and reception of *gurbilās* texts beyond the nineteenth century and allows us to further interrogate the relationship between the literary premodernity of *gurbilās* texts and the literary modernity of Bhai Vir Singh's historical writing in colonial Punjab.

Bhai Vir Singh and the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*

In 1925, Bhai Vir Singh completed a long biography of the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, entitled *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*. This biography of over a thousand pages narrates events related to the Guru's life and to his encounters with political, religious, and social figures. Its contemporary edition, published with *Bhai Vir Singh Sahitya Sadan*, is divided into two volumes and 104 chapters predominantly written in prose but also interspersed with occasional poems in verse. The text has been variously characterized in scholarship, as a biography (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 110), a retelling of the life of Guru Gobind Singh which required Bhai Vir Singh's "literary and scholarly sides" (Shackle 2014) and a biographical work in prose that is a "cross between history and hagiography" (Singh 2010, 83). Bhai Vir Singh himself categorizes his text as a *jīvan caritr* or "life story" of Guru Gobind Singh. The final version of the text is the result of a compilation of editorials written by Bhai Vir Singh about Guru Gobind Singh and published in the *Khalsa Samachar* newspaper that he created in 1899. The final version of the text was edited by Bhai Vir Singh before it was published in 1925. Bhai Vir Singh, who played various roles in the literary milieu of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a poet and novelist, was also an exegete, scholar, and historian. His knowledge of and his role in editing and interpreting *gurbilās* literature are attested by his editions of two major *gurbilās* texts: Santokh Singh's *Sūraj Granth* (1843) and Rattan Singh Bhangu's *Prācīn Panth Parkāsh* (1993 [1841]). Bhai Vir Singh was thus part of a "chain of receptions" formed by authors, readers, and texts associated with the *gurbilās* tradition and his interpretation of events related to Guru Gobind Singh's life was explicitly shaped by the interpretation of his predecessors whom he quotes profusely throughout his work. In the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*, Bhai Vir Singh offers his own interpretation of Guru Gobind Singh's life and his interpretation acts as a reflection that partially mirrors the concerns of his time. Before we look at how the battle of Bhangani is articulated in the four texts at hand, let us first contextualize *gurbilās* literature and how it resonates with the form and content of the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*.

***Gurbilās* literature and the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*:
contexts and intertexts**

Gurbilās literature—which literally means “the play or pastimes of the Guru”—refers to a collection of historical poems written in Brajbhasha, which is an early modern vernacular language that came to occupy a prominent place in religious and courtly circles in early modern North India, and produced from the late seventeenth to nineteenth centuries about the lives of the Sikh Gurus with a strong emphasis on the life of the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh and his heroic character (Dhavan 2011a, 2011b; Murphy 2012b, 2018). The political context of the eighteenth century significantly shaped the development of the Sikhs and their literature, and of *gurbilās* literature specifically (Murphy 2012a). The eighteenth century in North India was marked by the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire and the rise of contestant groups and successor regimes of which Khalsa Sikhs were part. In the Punjab, local groups gradually sought increasing political, economic, and military power in order to face increasing local functionaries of the Mughal state and the neighbouring hill chiefs (Alam 1986, 303). The Sikh contestant groups in the Punjab represented a significant threat to the Mughal forces in the region (Singh 1991, 284). More generally, Sikhs were active participants in the military labour market as well as this armed resistance. The Khalsa Sikhs, like many other groups of that period, embraced the culture of martiality that upgraded their social status from peasants to warriors in order to resist imperial authorities (Dhavan 2011a, 90, 139). In addition to this wider political context, the death of Guru Gobind Singh in 1708 in Nanded—concurrent with the beginning of the Mughal Empire’s decline—significantly impacted Sikh identity and literature produced in the eighteenth century (Murphy 2012a, 84–85). A few weeks preceding his death, Guru Gobind Singh is said to have vested the office of Guru in the *Ādi Granth* and in the Khalsa from which point the human Guruship shifted to a textual one. This switch from human guruship to textual guruship is significant in the shaping of Sikh identity in the eighteenth century and is particularly well reflected in *gurbilās* literature (Murphy 2012a, 84–85).

Anne Murphy and Purnima Dhavan have shown how *gurbilās* literature offers a space where Sikh historical representations and political imaginaries are articulated in different modes. Not only does it represent a site where Sikh historical representations are articulated in order to form what Murphy calls “the community around the memory of the Guru” (Murphy 2012a, 71) but it also represents a site where the conflicts and tensions experienced between the Mughal Empire and successor groups such as the Sikhs are articulated “to reflect the place of the Sikh community in an unstable political field at an early stage of this process” (Murphy 2012a, 85). In addition to being a space where early Khalsa identity is articulated, *gurbilās* literature also represents a space that reflects a wider world of shared political and cultural imaginaries of early modern North India.

In a similar way, Bhai Vir Singh's *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* not only represents a space where a modern Sikh understanding of the past and articulation of Sikh identity is reflected but also shares thematic and formal commonalities with other *gurbilās* texts. Thematically, the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* deals with events related to the tenth Guru's life and his interactions with various political, religious, and social figures that we find narrated in other *gurbilās* texts as well. Not every episode of the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* finds its parallel in earlier *gurbilās* texts but the episode of the battle of Bhangani contains many themes that are intertextually related to themes discussed in earlier versions of the narrative such as war strategies, the representation of others (represented by the Pathans and hill chiefs in the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*), encounters with non-Sikh religious figures, skills in the battlefield, and virtues embodied by the ideal Sikh such as heroism, courage, and sacrifice.

In addition to sharing thematic similarities, the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* shares the use of vocabulary of emotions to describe the tenth Guru with *gurbilās* texts. Dhavan has discussed the extensive use of a vocabulary of emotions in *gurbilās* literature (Dhavan 2011a). According to her, the language of emotions pervades *gurbilās* texts and allows people from different cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds to be connected around the memory of Guru Gobind Singh and his court in what she calls "affective communities." The *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*, like other *gurbilās* texts, has been described in a similar way. For instance, Sekhon and Duggal describe the text as lyrical and "highly charged with emotions" (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 110). They add that Bhai Vir Singh acts less as an historian when he composes the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* than as "a lover singing the praises of his beloved in highly colourful, exaggerated and ornate prose" (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 110). Recurrent examples of this "ornate prose" relate to descriptions of the Guru and his heroic character as well as of the landscape.

Although the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* share commonalities with *gurbilās* texts, there remain important formal differences between *gurbilās* texts and the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*. *Gurbilās* texts are written in verses and in Brajbhasha, whereas the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* is predominantly written in prose and in a modern register of Punjabi close to the modern dialect of Punjabi called *mājhī* (Matringe 1996, 52). However, Bhai Vir Singh's work is interspersed by a large number of quotes from earlier *gurbilās* texts that are written in verses and in Punjabi-Brajbhasha. While intertextual relationships are not always explicitly stated in earlier *gurbilās* texts, in *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*, Bhai Vir Singh explicitly cites and makes references to earlier *gurbilās* texts, a practice that is found in his other writings (Murphy 2012a, 137). This practice of citing earlier work is also pervasive in *gurbilās* literature and in other kinds of early modern Sikh literature such as the *janamsākhīs* and the *rahitnāmās*, for example. Citing is one of the most explicit practices that connects two texts intertextually (Genette 1982, 8) and the citation can be used for different purposes: "The citation sometimes acts as an argument

of authority (...) sometimes it has for objective to highlight a convergence (...) sometimes it is placed [within a text] solely to be contested or to support a counterargumentation” (Vouilloux 2005, 39). In the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*, Bhai Vir Singh often uses quotes attributed to Guru Gobind Singh as a seal of authority to reinforce his own narrative.

Even though *gurbilās* texts and the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* do not resonate completely in terms of form and language, their intertextual connections can lead to fruitful comparisons which help to understand the texts and their context of production for themselves, and also to delineate and understand a specific example of history of reception within Sikh and Punjabi literature. An examination of *gurbilās* texts produced at different points in time highlights, in broad terms, how historical circumstances shaped in different ways the narrative structure and content of these texts. The four narratives of the battle of Bhangani exemplify this point.

The battle of Bhangani

The battle of Bhangani is one of the many episodes of Guru Gobind Singh’s life narrated in *gurbilās* literature. The episode is also widely remembered and recounted among Sikh communities today.⁵ Dated to the late seventeenth century—1688 in most accounts—this battle occurred at a time when Guru Gobind Singh resided within the districts of Bhim Chand of Kahlur and Fateh Shah of Garhwal (Sri Nagar). This battle is one of the various battles fought by Guru Gobind Singh against local rulers of the Punjab Hills that are narrated in *gurbilās* texts (Dhavan 2011a, 192; Murphy 2018). While scholars generally acknowledge the existence of various narratives of the battle of Bhangani, a large majority of dominant voices in Sikh Studies have reconstituted the narrative based on the *Bacittar Nāṭak* under the assumption that this text is “almost the only source of information on this phase of Guru Gobind Singh’s life” (Grewal 2008, 25) or the “only reliable evidence regarding the Battle of Bhangani” (Gandhi 2004, 147). While the *Bacittar Nāṭak* has had significant influence on shaping Sikhs’ understanding of their past through the eighteenth century (Dhavan 2011a, 46), contemporary accounts of the battle of Bhangani suggest that the *Bacittar Nāṭak* was not the dominant narrative in popular circles at that time. My intention here is not to assess which narrative is closer to a “historically truthful” version of the battle but to explore in broad terms the nature of the intertextuality that ties these four narratives of the battle of Bhangani and what they can tell us about a history of reception in relation to *gurbilās* texts.

The pre-battle narratives

The three early narratives of the battle of Bhangani start with a eulogy of Guru Gobind Singh’s regal and playful activities at a place called Paonta, located in today’s Indian state of Himachal Pradesh to the northeast side

of the modern state of Punjab. In the earliest account, the *Bacittar Nāṭak*, the context leading up to the battle is provided within a brief three verses. In these verses, Guru Gobind Singh is described as enjoying various kinds of play (*līlā*) and as hunting different kinds of animals such as antelopes, bears, and lions on the bank of the Yamuna River. The Guru's activities anger the chief Fateh Shah in whose territory Guru Gobind Singh had taken residence and provoke the start of the battle.

*kālindrī taṭa kare bilāsā/anika bhānti ke pekhi tamāsā/
taha ke singha ghane cuna māre/rojha richa bahu bhānti bidāre/
fate sāha kopā tabi rājā/loha parā hamso binu kājā/*⁶

*On the bank of the kālindri river (Yamunā), I enjoyed myself and
watched various kinds of spectacles/
There we selected groups of lions and killed them/We also killed bears
and antelopes/
Then Fateh Shah got angry/He pointed his iron at me without any
purpose//*

In Sainapati's *Gur Sobhā*, the storyline follows very closely that of the *Bacittar Nāṭak*. The author starts with a eulogy of Guru Gobind Singh's qualities as a spiritual as well as a political leader. He then positions Guru Gobind Singh at the end of the line of the nine previous Sikh Gurus and goes on to describe his life at Paonta where for many years he enjoyed various kinds of play (*līlā*) and performed miracles on the bank of the Yamuna River. Guru Gobind Singh's activities at Paonta trigger Fateh Shah's anger which leads to the battle between Fateh Shah's and Guru Gobind Singh's troops.

*mākhovāla suhāvanā satiguru ko asathāna/
līlā anaka aneka bidhi kautaka karata bihāna//
ketaka barasa bhānti iha bhae/desa pānvate satigura gae/
jamanā tīra mahala banavāelkarata ānanda prabhū mana bhāe//
anika bhānti līlā tahi karīlfate sāha suni kai mani dharī/
bahuta kopā mani māhi basāyo/fauja banāi juddha kau āyo//
bahu prabala dala jori kai sainā saṅgi apāra/
nikaṭi āni ḍerā diye khabara bhaī darabāra//.*

(Sainapati 1967, 8–9)

*Beautiful Makhawal was the Guru's abode/
He enjoyed many activities in a variety of ways and performed won-
ders at dawn/
He spent many years this way, and then went to the region of Paonta/
He build a residence on the bank of the Yamuna river,
His mind was on the lord Prabhu, and he was content/
He engaged in a great variety of activities/*

*[but when] Fateh Shah heard about these things, it stuck to his mind/
 He became enraged and then formed an army for the battle to come/
 He formed a great and powerful army, with countless soldiers/
 He came close and made camp, and news came to the Guru's darbār//*

In both the *Bacittar Nāṭak* and in the *Gur Sobhā*, the pre-battle context is very brief and assigns the cause of the battle to Fateh Shah's anger. In the later Kuir Singh's *Gurbilās Pāṭshāhī Das*, the pre-battle context differs significantly. Not only is it longer than the two earlier narratives by over a hundred verses but it is also much richer in contextual details. The narrative starts with a description of Bhim Chand, the chief of Kahlur, on his way to Sri Nagar where his son is about to get married with the daughter of his neighbouring chief, Fateh Shah (who seems to have a much more secondary role in Kuir Singh's account). Due to a history of heated conflicts with Bhim Chand, Guru Gobind Singh refuses to let the king of Kahlur pass through his territory in fear of being attacked and suggests that he use another route. However, he allows Bhim Chand's son pass through Paonta and even welcomes him at his court, expressing profuse praises about his father-in-law, Fateh Shah. In Kuir Singh's narrative, Bhim Chand ends up missing his son's marriage which, in combination with other actions done by the Guru that he perceives as affronts to his honour, contributes to increase his anger and his will to start a fight against the Guru and his troops.

In the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*, the pre-battle narrative starts on a different note. The chapter starts with a description of a meeting between Guru Gobind Singh and his martial assembly who gathered on the foothills of the Shivalik Hills, at a place near Paonta to discuss war strategies against the hill chiefs who conspired to attack the Guru and his troops. Unlike Kuir Singh's text, the focus is not on the marriage narrative but on an extensive discussion of war strategies and on how the Pathans and the hill chiefs have deceived the Gurus. Unlike in the three earlier narratives, in the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*, the cause of the battle is not explicitly stated. However, Bhai Vir Singh makes it clear that the battle has been provoked by the hill chiefs Fateh Shah and Bhim Chand, and that the Guru and his troops are responding to the threat only defensively. Prior to the battle, the Guru had hired an army of 500 Pathans on the recommendation of Budhu Shah, whom he trusted they would fight on the Guru's side but Fateh Shah convinced them to work for him instead, promising them access to the Guru's riches through looting if they fought for him against the Guru (SKC, 129). The army of 500 Pathans led by Bikhan Khan, Kale Khan, Nijabat Khan, Hayat Khan, and Javahar Khan (SKC, 129) previously worked for Aurangzeb but the army was discharged from the emperor's employment. According to Bhai Vir Singh, Aurangzeb discharged the army so that the 500 Pathans would be hired by the Guru and would trick him at the very last minute by fleeing his army at the dawn of the battle (SKC, 129).

Context of the battle: the use of “Hindu and Puranic” elements

Bhai Vir Singh starts his narrative of the battle with a sense of urgency: the Guru and his troops quickly need to find a way to not be defeated by Fateh Shah, who is described as ready to fight with great vigour (*SKC*, 128) and as commanding a large army of skilled soldiers (*SKC*, 131). Bhai Vir Singh does not elaborate on the reasons that caused the battle to the same extent that Kuir Singh does but he provides great details about the treachery of the Pathans, Aurangzeb, and the hill chiefs, theme that is recurrent in other *gurbilās* texts (Murphy 2018). Murphy has shown how the hill chiefs are represented as “political others” and their “treachery emphasized” in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, a trend that also appears in the *Bacittar Nāṭak* and in the *Gur Sobhā* (Murphy 2018). In contrast, in the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār*’s narrative of the battle, the focus on the treachery of Aurangzeb, the hill chiefs, and of the Pathans serves to emphasize the virtuous qualities of the Guru and the Sikhs on the battlefield. According to Murphy, “Vir Singh was, as Fenech notes and as will be discussed, fundamentally concerned with the representation of Sikh pasts—utilizing ‘model’ Sikhs from the past as a mean to exhort his present-day fellow Sikhs to follow appropriate Khalsa behavior” (Murphy 2012a, 123–124). Fenech also suggests that Bhai Vir Singh could not tolerate fostering negative representations of Sikhs in his work as well as in the *gurbilās* texts he edited and worked on producing literary work that would inspire Sikhs of his period to act as heroically and virtuously as the Guru and his troops (Fenech 2000, 191). Bhai Vir Singh was concerned about promoting representations of Sikh identity that were not only distinct from what was perceived as Hindu at the time but also in line with a Khalsa-centred identity, which is reflected in his other works. One strategy deployed by Bhai Vir Singh to emphasize the distinct identity of Sikhs was to not include references to “Hindu or Puranic” elements in his work. For instance, in relation to Bhai Vir Singh’s edition of Santokh Singh’s *Sūraj Granth* and Rattan Singh Bhangu’s *Prācīn Panth Parkāsh*, Fenech observes that Bhai Vir Singh edited out elements of the text that were against “his vision of Sikhism and added passages which supplemented his Tat Khalsa-aligned interpretation” (Fenech 2000, 189; Murphy 2012a, 123–124). One example is Bhai Vir Singh’s deletion of the goddess episode from Rattan Singh Bhangu’s *Prācīn Panth Parkāsh* as reported by Gian Singh and Fenech (Fenech 2000, 190). According to Fenech, this deletion tells us a lot about the concerns of Bhai Vir Singh in regard to Sikh identity in the twentieth century: “The notion of Sikh identity, particularly a Sikh identity that differed from a Hindu one, was simply not as fundamental an issue in the Punjab of 1840 as it was in the first decade of the twentieth century” (Fenech 2000, 1991). This prompts us to take into account the specific colonial context at the time of Bhai Vir Singh whose concerns, Murphy argues, must be located in “relation to

British interests in Punjabi and Sikh history, other historiographical and cultural interests, and the eventual decline of Sikh state and ascendancy of the British in Punjab” (Murphy 2012a, 124).

This exclusion of “Hindu and Puranic” references from the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* constitutes an important difference with the three earlier narratives of the battle of Bhangani. In the *Bacittar Nāṭak*, the *Gur Sobhā*, and the *Gurbilās Pātshāhī Das*, we find references throughout the text to vignettes and motifs perceived today as “Hindu.” For instance, in the three texts, the description of the battle is filled with images of thirsty demons, goddesses, spirits, and vultures wandering and flying around the dead bodies of soldiers on the battlefield. In the *Bacittar Nāṭak*, at the end of the battle when most of the enemies have been defeated, *ḍāka* (demons), *ḍākaṇī* (demoness), and *baitāla* (animated corpses)⁷ are wandering around on the battlefield: *sabai svāmi dharaman su bīran sambhāre/ḍākī ḍākaṇī bhuta pretan bakāre/hasai bīra baitāla au sudha sudhin/cavī cāvaṇḍīyan uḍī gadhi bradhin*/(All the masters remembered the *dharam* of heroes. *ḍāka*, *ḍākaṇī*, *bhuta* (ghosts), and *pretan* (spirits) made noise. Heroes, *baitāla*, and pure perfected beings were laughing. The Chamunda goddess and vultures were flying in the four directions.) (*Bacittar Nāṭak*). A similar passage appears in the *Gur Sobhā*: *nacata hai bhūta baitāla bhairo tabā giddha maṇḍalāta raṇa mai suhāhelānikai joganī patra pūrana bhariolacava kai udara tinake aghāhe* (GS, 9) (*bhūta*, *baitāl*, and *bhairon* were dancing there. The vultures were flying around in circle on the battlefield. *Joganī* came and filled (her) bowl. Having rinsed her mouth generously after eating, she felt satisfied) (GS). And in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* as well: *caudisa bīra saṅghāre anta na ānvadā/ḍakī ḍākaṇī bhārī cikī cāvaṇḍī/bhaude kāka apārī jambuka māsa mai/gīdhām khā tripatārī kālī āiām* Religion, Culture, Theory, Volume 16, Issues 1–2, 28–40./(Fourteen heroes were killing endlessly. The (battlefield) was full of *ḍāka* and *ḍākaṇī*, and the Goddess Chamunda was shrieking. There were endless wandering crows and jackals [eating] the flesh. The vultures were eating and Kali came from the three underworlds.) (GPD 1999 [1968], 75).

While the reference to *ḍāka* and *ḍākaṇī* appears once in Bhai Vir Singh’s narrative, it appears as part of a quote from the *Bacittar Nāṭak* that Bhai Vir Singh uses as an authoritative voice meant to reinforce his own version of the battle. For example, at the end of a battle scene in which some Pathan warriors and hill chiefs are described as amazed by the skills of the Guru’s troop on the battle field (*is juddh vic kuch vākyāt aise hoe jo paṭhāṇām te rājīān nūm daṅg karan vale san*/) (In this battle, the events were such that the Pathans and the Kings were amazed.) (SKC, 136), Bhai Vir Singh cites a passage from the *Bacittar Nāṭak* that summarizes what he just described (*is sameṃ dā hāl srī gurū jī ne saṅkhep vic aiun lakhiā hai*/) (Guru jī has written a summary like this (about) the condition of this time) (SKC, 136). Following that quote from the *Bacittar Nāṭak*, Bhai Vir Singh avoids discussing the passage (and the mention of *ḍāka* and *ḍākaṇī*) and immediately

begins a new paragraph to continue his description of the battle on the field. Bhai Vir Singh does not hesitate to present a version of the battle free from references to vignettes and motifs that he perceives as non-Sikh but does not alter the words of Guru Gobind Singh even if those contain elements that Bhai Vir Singh may have considered “contrary to his vision of Sikhism” (Fenech 2000, 189).

We find another example of the presence of “Hindu or Puranic” elements in the narrative when Guru Gobind Singh meets with the Udasi Mahant Kirpal. Brahma, Sanak, Shesh Nag, and Narad are mentioned not by the Guru but by the mahant himself to emphasize the grandeur of Guru Gobind Singh: *brahmādika sanakādika sāre/sekha šārdā pāñ na pāre/dhyāna bikhai jogīšvara dhyāvaiṃ/rikhi nārada te adika gāvaiṃ*/(All the great Brahma, Sanak, and Shesh Nag (and Sharda) cannot find (your) limit. And the great sage Narad sings.) (SKC, 130). We can comfortably see how these words were not problematic for Bhai Vir Singh since they are said by Mahant Kirpal, who is described as an Udasi and therefore not expected to embody a model of virtue for Khalsa Sikhs.

Pervasive references to what are today perceived as “Hindu” elements in these earlier *gurbilās* texts were more problematic to Bhai Vir Singh than to the authors of these texts themselves. For example, Kuir Singh uses profuse “Hindu and Puranic” elements in his *gurbilās* without hesitation. It is among some later commentators that Kuir Singh’s text created uneasiness, since Kuir Singh fully embraces Guru Gobind Singh’s association with the god Vishnu. While Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* locates Guru Gobind Singh in a world which contains a large number of Shaiva and Shakta images, it is his association with Vishnu and his depiction as an avatar of Vishnu that has created most controversies in Sikh historiography. In *Gurbilās Patshahi Das*, we find various vignettes and motifs describing Guru Gobind Singh as an avatar of Vishnu whose mission is to destroy errors and duality, restore the dharma, and establish the divine Name. At various places in the text, Guru Gobind Singh is referred as Ram, Hari, or Krishna (GPD 1999 [1968], 7).⁸ While the use of “Hari” and “Ram” in bhakti literature does not always carry Vaishnava connotations, in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, the associations with the god Vishnu are difficult to dismiss.

These fully assumed associations between Sikh and Vaishnava elements by Kuir Singh have caused more headaches to later commentators than to Kuir Singh himself. Based on the assumption that boundaries between the Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims were as little porous in early modern India as they are often perceived today, scholars have made arguments to reconcile this apparent contradiction. According to Surjit Hans, Kuir Singh “held heterodox beliefs” (Hans 2005, 248) and portrayed Guru Gobind Singh exclusively in “Hindu” terms. According to Hans, Kuir Singh’s description of Guru Gobind Singh as an avatar of Vishnu is tied to state patronage and its use can be explained by the demands and requirements of his patrons: “the Gurbilas Patshahi Das carries a strong imprint of Singh rule under

Ranjit Singh for whom it was absolutely necessary to hold the three communities in some kind of balance” (Hans 2005, 250). Hans locates the production of Kuir Singh’s text in the court of Ranjit Singh who ruled from 1799 to 1839 which is later than the actual accepted date of the text (Dhavan 2011a, 182).

Another author who has worked on Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, Gurtej Singh, claims that Kuir Singh was a Hindu before taking the *pahul* or ritual of Khalsa initiation and he suggests that Kuir Singh felt conflicted about his Hindu and Sikh identities and was unable “to subscribe exclusively to one or the other” (G. Singh 2004, 49). Gurtej Singh, like Surjit Hans, perceives the categories “Sikh” and “Hindu” as separate entities and anachronistically positions the presence of Vaishnava elements in Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās* in conflict with Sikh elements. I am not suggesting that Kuir Singh does not articulate a modality of Sikh subjectivity in his *gurbilās* (Murphy 2012b, 98); in fact, Kuir Singh’s text is in line with core Sikh doctrinal and ethical elements that pervade the central scriptures, the Guru Granth Sahib such as a *nirgun* description of the divine described as the first maker, who dwells in one and many and who is formless, indescribable, and omnipotent, and the frequent reiteration of Sikh practices such as the repetition of the Name, the communal singing of songs or *kirtans*, the importance of service or *seva*, and the sharing of food or *langar*. However, it is important to reframe the commonly assumed dichotomy between “Sikh” and “Hindu” in Kuir Singh’s text. Murphy has argued that in the context of Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, the category “Hindu” should not be perceived as a static category referring to a defined group of persons. The category “Sikh” in Kuir Singh refers to those who follow the Guru and “Hindu” refers to those who are not Turks (Murphy 2012b, 107).

Conclusion

There is a lot to be said about the particulars of each of these narratives but a close analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter. My goal is rather to reflect broadly on the intertextual ties and variations between these four narratives and on what they can tell us about history of reception of *gurbilās* texts. While the four narratives share striking similarities in form and content in the way they describe the battle itself, the earlier accounts bear important differences with the later accounts in the way they frame the pre-battle context. I want to suggest that the relation between the earlier narratives and the later narratives exemplifies what Janet Kamphorst has called (based on Stuart Blackburn) a “process of narrative expansion” (Kamphorst 2008, 15) according to which, over time, “(...) a story accumulates themes, imagery and episode by crossing local and regional boundaries as poets and performers refurbish their narrative in order to hold the attention of new, regional audiences consisting of people from different social groups (...)” (Kamphorst 2008, 15). The difference in the way the

pre-battle unfolds in earlier accounts as compared to later accounts, such as Kuir Singh, suggests a change in the composition of the target audience. As Dhavan has shown, the composition of the Khalsa Panth underwent important transformational processes throughout the eighteenth century and its membership became more diversified and accommodating of “non-Khalsa practices” (Dhavan 2011a, 10) by the end of the eighteenth century. The presence of the wedding episode in Kuir Singh, while it may not reflect actual historical circumstances, perhaps represents issues that may have been important for those who produced and consumed the text in the second half of the eighteenth century. As Dhavan says, honour feuds had increased in late eighteenth-century Punjab and were tied to “the evolving martial Khalsa identity” (Dhavan 2011a, 137). Dhavan has also argued that weddings were especially conducive to provoking honour feuds. It was expected that the father of the bride be a generous host to the family of the groom and a breach to that custom could potentially “[endanger] not only the status of the bride’s father as a generous host but also his sense of masculine honour as a warrior, if the insult was allowed to pass without retribution” (Dhavan 2010, 73). In Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, since Bhim Chand missed the marriage of his son, it can be conjectured that since the bride’s father, Fateh Shah, could not fulfil his role as an honourable host, he became angry and decided to wage a battle against the Guru. While this narrative may not reveal the actual historical circumstances of the battle, it exemplifies, at the very least, how an honour feud could be imagined in the late eighteenth century.

In Bhai Vir Singh’s narrative, which was written two centuries after Kuir Singh’s *gurbilās*, the Khalsa Panth is imagined as less diversified and accommodating of non-Khalsa practices than in Kuir Singh’s text. In response to the colonial context of the time, Bhai Vir Singh produced a version of the battle of Bhangani in which Sikhs are represented as ideal figures embodying virtues such as courage, heroism, and sacrifice in the face of adversity, devotion, and service in their day-to-day life. Bhai Vir Singh’s representation of the seventeenth-century battle acts as a “Satijug, a holy time, (...), that the Gurus themselves had taught and that Sikhs must remember, mourn the loss of, and emulate” (Murphy 2012a, 136) in addition to providing an ideal for Sikh identity based on the Khalsa identity. His exclusion of “Hindu and Puranic” elements from the *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* therefore serves to emphasize the distinctive identity of the Sikhs and provides a model of ideal Sikh behaviour that is in accordance with a Khalsa-centred identity meant to inspire Bhai Vir Singh’s Sikh contemporaries.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a reprint of Vig, Julie. 2020. “Intertextuality and Literary Reception: Connecting Bhai Vir Singh’s *Srī Kalgīdhar Camatkār* to *gurbilās* literature,” *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory*, Volume 16, Issues 1–2, 28–40.

- 2 Shackle, A *Gurū Nānak Glossary*, xxiii.
- 3 Anne Murphy discusses connections between *gurbilās* texts and Bhai Vir Singh's novel *Sundarī* in her monograph Murphy (2012a). Purnima Dhavan discusses the adaptation of *gurbilās* literature into Persian court histories in the nineteenth century in Dhavan (2011a). "Devotion and Its Discontents: The Affective Communities of Gurbilas Texts." Chap. 7; and Dhavan (2009).
- 4 "Horizon of expectations" is an expression used by Jauss in *Toward and Aesthetic of Reception* and derived from Edmund Husserl's work.
- 5 See, for instance, popular online encyclopedia and websites such as sikhwiki.org and thesikhencyclopedia.com to name a few.
- 6 Dasam Granth, chapter 8, verses 1–3, MN-000106, www.panjabdigilib.org
- 7 Thank you to Adheesh Sathaye for his input on the translation of *baitāla*.
- 8 *rāma tumai, puni krisana tumai, puni srī guru hai saca sāvavatārī. You are Ram, you then are Krishna, then you are the Guru, the avatar of the Lord (Shah).*

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9 Vir Singh's Publication of the *Gurpratāp Sūraj Granth*

Jvala Singh

Vir Singh (1872–1957), titled by many as the sixth river of Punjab, arguably is the most influential writer, commentator, and publisher of the twentieth century within the Sikh community. Vir Singh was a pioneer in the production of new kinds of literature in Punjabi: in many ways, he pioneered the modern Punjabi novel while running a publication house, the Khalsa Tract Society, which produced and published various forms of Punjabi literature from scriptural commentary to social reform advocacy. Born during the infancy of the Singh Sabha reform movement, Vir Singh also found ways to present and publish older literature in an accessible way for a less sophisticated audience. His task of publishing the *Sūraj Granth* (1843) (also known as *Sūraj Prakāsh*) written by Santokh Singh (1787–1843) would be the single most lengthy endeavor of his life, continuing over a decade to result in the publication of the text in 14 volumes for a Gurmukhi-reading Punjabi audience.

The *Sūraj Prakāsh* is a *mahākāvya* (courtly epic) Brajbhasha historical narrative of the ten Sikh Gurus written by the poet Santokh Singh over 60,000-verse long. At a young age, Santokh Singh began tutelage under the renowned Giani Sant Singh (1768–1832) of Amritsar, who was not only known for his exegesis on Sikh scripture but also on the *Tulsī Rāmāyanā*, the *Rāmacaritmānas*, having produced a commentary on the text in Khari Boli (Lutgendorf 1991, 142). It was under such a renowned scholar that Santokh Singh learned Brajbhasha and Sanskrit and would go on to write a variety of texts, before coming under the patronage of Raja Udai Singh of the Kaithal state.¹ While the endeavor took nearly ten years to complete, the massive text would become the single largest *prabandha mahākāvya*, a continuous highly complex and metered composition in Brajbhasha literature within the Sikh world and likely outside as well. Busch describes such texts as the “high genre of *rīti* literary culture. These texts belong to a world of carefully crafted *kāvya* and are frequently composed using complex meters and dense figuration” (Busch 2011, 69). *Sūraj Prakāsh* builds off of Sikh historical texts written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as the *janamsākhī* and *gurbilās* literatures, which are discussed in other chapters in this volume.

Santokh Singh articulates his aim as a scholar at the beginning of the *Sūraj Prakāsh* wherein he writes:

The history of the Gurus within this world is not found all together in one spot. Like how gold mixed in sand can be properly separated, similarly I will extract all the stories and write them all down correctly. For the purpose of making my words fruitful I will recite the great praise of the True Guru.

Like how butter resides within yogurt and by churning the yogurt the essence is obtained, similarly from the praise and critique of the Gurus in the world I will collect the praise, that which brings great peace.

Like how the churning of the ocean brought out the jewels [*rattan*], being brought into the world they glistened. Similarly, I'll bring out the great praise of the True Guru having everyone listen to it from one collection that I will make shine.²

Murphy keenly notes how Santokh Singh is synthesizing previous materials and how “we see, in a sense, the transition from *janam-sākhī* to *gurbilās*, within this one text” (Murphy 2012, 114). While Santokh Singh is writing many decades prior to the reform movements in Punjab, his aim in this work and others does bear the mark of correcting the record both philosophically and historically.³ This is done from utilizing texts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries while curating the information in a poetic and enjoyable manner via a *prabandha mahākāvya*.

Soon after the inception of the *Sūraj Prakāsh*, the text received great esteem; many handwritten copies were produced. Various scholars, including Santokh Singh's eldest son, Ajai Singh, would perform *kathā*, exegesis, of the text daily: Ajai Singh was known for performing daily *kathā* at Takht Anandpur Sahib until his passing (V. Singh 1989, 169). An early manuscript dated 1847 CE with significant mention of the family of Sahib Singh Bedi in the colophons suggests that soon after the completion of *Sūraj Prakāsh*, manuscripts were being copied for important Sikh families.⁴ By the 1880s, the text was so well received that the text became the foundation, a “go to” source, from which many authors extracted and composed their own versions or briefs of the text. The renowned Patna Sahib Mahant and Brajbhasha poet, Sumer Singh (1847–1903), wrote, “there is no other text which is equivalent, understand it as the treasure trove of the guru's praise, the exalted Santokh Singh received great admiration for creating this vessel to liberate all the Singhs” (Kahlon 2000, 527). Sumer Singh's life bares a fascinating example of how the realm of Brajbhasha poetry was a network connected to various communities, a network Sumer Singh traversed extensively (Ritter 2010, 260). Lietner in 1883 also wrote of Santokh Singh proclaiming, “Santokh Singh of Kantal in the Karnal District, has rendered his name immortal” (Leitner 1971, 30). Leitner further mentions how the Raja

of Jhind was commissioning an Urdu rendition of the text, which had not yet been completed. Vir Singh (hereafter, BVS) writes that the text became the basis for the texts written in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

The writers, namely Baba Banesha Singh Ji Bedi specifically took from this text [*Sūraj Prakāsh*] to write his *Gur Nanak Sūrayodai*. Giani Gian Singh took so much from this text that his first portion of his historical text has the second name of *Vārtik Sūraj Prakāsh*. Pandit Giani Bhai Hazara Singh Ji wrote and published a brief of the text named *Sūraj Prakāsh Cūṛnakā*. From reading the works of Baba Prem Singh it's clear that their text is also based off of this text, and its clear countless other authors have written small texts based off this text [*Sūraj Prakāsh*]. Khalsa Tract Society has also taken from this source, along with other research, created Punjabi literature. Maccaulfie did look into other sources and research but his main source was this text. *Khursaid Khalsa* in Urdu also took from this text. Khursaid also means *Sūraj* [sun]. Other poets who would write in *baitan* or lovely *chand* metres have taken from this text and continue to do so.

(V. Singh 1989, 80)

Clearly in the realm of Sikh historiography, the *Sūraj Prakāsh* was a titan of a text, but to fully appreciate why BVS endeavored for over ten years to publish the text, we must look back at his lineage and how the text traveled into the twentieth century.

Familial lineage

BVS came from an illustrious scholarly family both on his maternal and paternal sides, which shaped his early scholarly life. His paternal grandfather, Kahn Singh (1788–1878), was a scholar of Brajbhasha and Sanskrit, scribing many texts as well as composing original pieces in Brajbhasha (B. Singh 1945, 4). He was initiated as a Sikh under Sahib Singh Bedi's group, as mentioned before an important Sikh family having a direct lineage with Guru Nanak (1469–1539). Sahib Singh Bedi (1756–1834), an important *misal* leader in the late eighteenth century, coronated Maharaj Ranjit Singh, anointing him with the *tilak* ceremonial mark before ascending to the throne in 1801. At the end of his *Sār Ramāyan*, Kahn Singh praises greatly and details meeting with Sahib Singh Bedi (verses 734–739). This is an important point to note by Balbir Singh, BVS's younger brother, who writes that although Kahn Singh maintained relations with many pacifist Sikhs and *sadhus* in Amritsar, such as Nirmalas, Sevapanthis, and Dadupanthis, he was steadfast in his praise of Guru Gobind Singh and Sikh martial traditions (B. Singh 1945, 156). Kahn Singh, who earlier in life would be a roaming ascetic, would be the first Khalsa Sikh in the history of Vir Singh's family, although they claim their ancestry back to Kaura Mal (d. 1752), a

famous minister in the eighteenth century who had favorable relations with *misal* period Sikhs like Jassa Singh Ahluwalia and Ramgharia (B. Singh 1945, 4). Kaura Mal, although not a Khalsa, was certainly considered an ally to *misal* period Sikhs as Dhavan details; Kaura Mal helped to lift a Mughal siege upon Sikhs at Ramrauni in 1748 (Dhavan 2011, 74).

It was in this cultural milieu where Kahn Singh began writing in the early to mid-eighteenth century focusing on various transcreations of the pan-South Asian epic, the *Rāmāyāna* (B. Singh 1945, 95). Among the many versions he read, he was known for copying Sant Gulab Singh Nirmala's (b. 1732) version the *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* (1782) and was a friend of Budh Singh who wrote the *Adbhut Rāmāyaṇa* (1806). Kahn Singh would later write his own text titled *Sār Rāmāyaṇa*, which focused on understanding hidden mysterious qualities and virtues of *prakriti*, the material world (B. Singh 1945, 95). The numerous versions of the *Rāmāyāna* during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries produced by Sikhs laced with praise of the Sikh Gurus were a common trait within transcreations and require further study.⁵ While this type of literature production soon phased out of vogue during the colonial period and subsequent reform movements, the endeavor to copy by hand and to produce literature had a profound effect on Kahn Singh's son, Charan Singh (1853–1908), Vir Singh's father. From the young age of six, Charan Singh was instructed by his father, Kahn Singh, to join in the process of handwriting his own copy of the *Gurū Granth*, with his uncle Suhela Singh who would perform the actual scribal work. Nevertheless, the young Charan Singh would sit alongside every day to grind ink and prepare paper. Young Charan Singh spent two years in this way and when it was completed in 1861, this would predate the first ever stone-printed version of *Gurū Granth* by three years (B. Singh 1957, 14). This was an important part of Charan Singh's upbringing who then took to higher schooling and would soon begin reading and learning Farsi, Brajbhasha along with Sanskrit, following in his father's footsteps (B. Singh 1945, 163).

Charan Singh would himself become an eminent scholar who studied and practiced Ayurveda while also studying Sikh scripture primarily from his father and maternal uncle. Charan Singh would compose works in Brajbhasha and Punjabi across various genres like translations, novels, historical briefs, and informational texts. In Brajbhasha, he composed historical briefs on the eighth and tenth Sikh Gurus called *Aṭal Prakāśh* (1891) and *Dasam Gur Chritar* (1897). In Punjabi, he composed many short tracts, following from his son BVS, along with a translation of the Sanskrit play of Kalidasa *Shakuntala* (1900). A collection of Charan Singh's works were published posthumously by Vir Singh's younger brother, Dr. Balbir Singh, in 1957 but many of the compositions were initially published in various Khalsa Tract Society editions.

Charan Singh's initial interest was in poetry, specifically Brajbhasha poetry, and he would spend his time reading *Tulsī Rāmāyāna*, *Sūr Sāgara*,

and Santokh Singh's *Sūraj Prakāsh* (B. Singh 1957, 48). Charan Singh quickly became known for his skill and interest in his poetry, specifically for creating on the spot verses about any matter, food- or medicine-related. This led to him organizing *kavī darbārs*, or poetry recitals, alongside the *parkarma* of Harimandar Sāhib in Amritsar, with named poets of the time, including Sumer Singh from Patna, Giani Gian Singh (author of *Navin Panth Prakāsh*), Tara Singh, Nihal Singh, Kavi Raghunath Ji, Kavi Din Dayal Ji, and many others (Giani Mahā Singh 2009, 14).

Beyond organizing such events, Charan Singh also had an interest in education and was known for performing daily *kathā*, or discourse, of portions of *Sūraj Prakāsh* in the late evening, sometimes to an audience of various holy men and scholars. Students would come to the house to learn how to read such texts like *Sūraj Prakāsh*, and Charan Singh himself would utilize the text as a source when writing his *Aṭal Prakāsh* (1891) and *Dasam Gur Chritar* (1897). Such was his expertise that he acquired the name of *Pandit of Sūraj Prakāsh*, due to his familiarity with the text (V. Singh 1989, 85).

Arising during the time of the reformation movements in the late nineteenth century, many of Charan Singh's writings can be seen to have the purpose of informing, educating, and reforming the general public. Most notable is his *Maharani Sharab Kaur* (1893), a didactical text between characters presenting the deleterious effects of substance abuse, mostly focused on alcohol but also opium, cannabis, and tobacco (Singh 1941, 35). Charan Singh followed from his son in writing novels, at the end of an allegorical fictional novel Jang Maḍolī (1903), a character remarks, "it's regrettable that other novels are only for amusement [*hā hā hī hī*]. We rather think of this novel suitable to be heard and read by those people who visit the true congregation" (Singh 1941, 518). Charan Singh's Punjabi rendition of *Shakuntala* begins with a note of regret that the Punjabi language has not yet developed enough to convey all the subtle poetic expressions within such a fine work but calls on future authors in Punjabi to develop the language through the construction of new texts, expanding the vocabulary of the language (B. Singh 1941, 194).

Not only was Vir Singh's paternal family embedded within the literary elite but his maternal family was also renowned in this respect. At the age of 16, Charan Singh was married to Uttam Kaur, the daughter of the renowned Giani Hazara Singh (1828–1908) of the *Gianiā Bungā* institution in Amritsar. Although Kahn Singh was known in Amritsar, and by extension so was Charan Singh, the marriage enhanced the importance of Charan Singh, as Hazara Singh was a noted writer, who was instrumental in forming the Punjabi curriculum in Gurmukhi print, transcreating much of the school curriculum from Urdu into Punjabi for the school board textbooks.⁶ Beyond being a scholar of Punjabi, Brajbhasha, and Sanskrit, Hazara Singh was also an avid scholar of Persian and transcreated into Punjabi the classics of Saadi, *Gulistan* and *Bostan*. Hazara Singh also wrote a brief of *Sūraj Prakāsh* which he named *Sūraj Prakāsh Cūrṇakā*

(Singh 1989, 80). A competent commentator as well, he wrote much of the *Gurū Granth Sāhib Kosh* published by Vir Singh, along with a commentary on Bhai Gurdas' writings. Hazara Singh was an inspector for vernacular schools and was a prominent member within the Amritsar Singh Sabha during the late nineteenth century, serving the institution as their secretary. Much of the writings of Hazara Singh were not original, rather transcriptions from Persian, Braj, Urdu into Punjabi, and it is said that the young Vir Singh, in dialogue with his grandfather, asked why he does not create new fresh work. Hazara Singh replies, in a way to bless the child that, you will be the one to create new fresh literature in Punjabi (Singh 2009, 35).

This was the familial lineage from which Vir Singh emerged from. He had the opportunity to learn at a very young age from both of his grandfathers, who had learned from institutions that predated Singh Sabha reforms but who were also in some form or another involved in these reforms. It was in this environment of transcribing and pushing past literary production into new audiences where BVS grew up and the publication of the *Suraj Prakash* flows forth from these efforts.

Publishing the epic

Beyond Vir Singh's interest in creating new content, he was still anchored by core Sikh literature which at an older age he endeavored to publish and comment on. The thought of publishing *Sūraj Prakāsh* arose to Vir Singh after his lengthy task of completing the *Srī Gurū Granth Sahib Kosh*, which at its core was based on Hazara Singh's writings, which were initially published in 1898. Vir Singh spent seven years adding to this dictionary before publishing the text in 1927. Following this lengthy task, Vir Singh endeavored to publish in print *Sūraj Prakāsh* in the form of *prayāvān*, also called *padched*, or in the separated script form as opposed to the *larīvār* format of *scriptio continua*. The drive behind this was to make the text more accessible, and when this thought of Vir Singh got leaked to residents in and around Amritsar, he soon discovered that not only were people happy with this idea but also wanted some form of commentary and notes to explain the difficult sections of the text (V. Singh 1989, 10). Vir Singh along with his friend Rāgī Hīra Singh then began forming their plan to begin the task but upon first look they realized that the invocations of the text, which were highly sophisticated, needed full explanatory notes for readers to understand its densely layered meanings. While Vir Singh's father was an expert in the text and he grew up in a household where the *kathā* of the text was performed, he still required further schooling and spent a full year under the tutelage of Giani Amir Singh Sevapanthi of the Satogali Taksal in Amritsar. Vir Singh's connection with the Sevapanthi tradition runs deep, as he was first initiated through *khande-di-pahul* from the hands of the esteemed centenarian Rāgī Shām Singh (1803–1926), who was famed for performing kirtan in Harimandar Sahib daily for over 70 years. Beyond

studying under Amir Singh, Vir Singh had many notes on *Sūraj Prakāsh* from his father and paternal grandfather; photos of Dr. Charan Singh's handwritten notes on *Sūraj Prakāsh* are found in a 2009 publication of Vir Singh's life by Maha Singh (M. Singh 2009, 21).

Taking in all this knowledge Vir Singh was then able to provide the explanatory notes for the invocations. Following this, the second task was finding differences in manuscripts utilizing a manuscript from 1862 as the gold standard to compare against. This manuscript was written nearly 20 years after Santokh Singh finished his *magnum opus* but it was the oldest full text available to BVS at the time. Another partial manuscript was available and utilized from 1855. A small group sat together with the various manuscripts where one reader would recite from one manuscript, while the others followed along noting differences. These differences, including both additions and reductions, can be seen in the footnotes in Vir Singh's edition which can be viewed as a true critical edition of the text.

Following the completion of the commentary on the text's invocations and analysis of manuscript differences, Vir Singh's third task was to provide explanatory footnotes for difficult words or lines within the text. BVS notes how this was an important component of the publication, as the text itself wasn't only written in Brajbhasha but was laden with Sanskrit vocabulary and phrases (V. Singh 1989, 11). The presence of the Sanskrit words and phrases presented several problems within the text, first that they required footnotes with meanings, second the limitation of the Gurmukhi script to properly convey Sanskrit spelling. BVS also notes how the scribes of the text, who were likely not Sanskrit-educated, penned the Sanskrit words in Gurmukhi very loosely, making it difficult to discern the proper meaning (V. Singh 1989, 11).⁷ BVS initially thought that they should correct the Sanskrit portions but then decided to leave the portion as is and provide the corrected portions in the footnotes below.⁸ Beyond Sanskrit, Santokh Singh also utilized Persian, Arabic, rural Punjabi, Pothohari, Lehnda, Pahari, and general Punjabi in a way which required explanatory notes for the reader. Providing additional historical information was extremely important for Vir Singh and this was another one of his major tasks. BVS notes how Santokh Singh, who inherited great amounts of source material to work with, was not in possession or capable of digging through Persian sources such as *Jahangirnama* and *Dabistan*. BVS provides these additional sources in the footnotes to give the reader a broader perspective on certain issues, for example, the stories related to Banda Bahadur, Guru Arjan's martyrdom, the Raagmala, etc. (V. Singh 1989, 14).

Beyond providing definitions for words, BVS also structured the text in a way never done before, by providing headings for each chapter in brackets.⁹ As written by Santokh Singh, no such headings for chapters were presented but the chapters would conclude with a boilerplate phrase at the end, and this very often wouldn't fully capture the chapter's contents.¹⁰ As written by Santokh Singh, when including the sections related to Guru Nanak in

the *Nanak Prakāsh* (1824), the entire collection is constructed in 22 sections, Guru Nanak's portions called the sun rise and sun set, *pūrabāradh* and *uttarāradh*, Guru Angad to Guru Tegh Bahadur are located within sections called the 12 *rāṣī*, zodiac signs, and Guru Gobind Singh's sections within the six seasons, *che rutān*, and two solstices, *do ayan*, with each chapter within these sections called *aṇshū* or sunray. Titled the *Gurpratāp Sūraj Granth*, the Sun-like-Illumination of the Guru's Glory, the structure's micro to macro expansion of the solar experiences represents a continuity between the Gurus themselves via changing forms and manifestations. Vir Singh's evenly sized 14-volume publication orders the sections chronologically correct but pays little attention to starting or ending the volumes in accordance with Santokh Singh's organization. Adding the titles for the chapters at the start was important for BVS especially in the fifth *rut*, or season. This section was embedded with dense terminology related to Yoga, Nyaya, and Vedanta philosophies, and the headings served to differentiate between these philosophies, clarifying that some sections were not "Sikh". BVS writes:

There are some places where Vedanta and Yoga appears with the topics of Gurmat and some Gianis take those as one form with Gurmat and from that light narrate as such, but Kavi Ji [Santokh Singh] has separated Gurmat there, at those places this has been shown [via our headings]. Like when Bhai Daya Singh Ji speaks to *Śastrī Vedānt* and then after speaks to Gurmat, at that portion naturally it's not easy to understand when the section of Gurmat begins, that has now been identified with a title, noting that now the section explaining Gurmat has begun. (V. Singh 1989, 13)

Interesting to note that the title Santokh Singh gives to that section which BVS notes as *Śastrī Vedānt* is *Sūkham Vichār*, subtle reflections, and BVS has a footnote at the end of this chapter writing that the knowledge in this chapter is only informational and not applicable for Sikh practice. Vir Singh's careful notation provides him a voice of advocacy, allowing him to differentiate and contextualize portions of the text which were unseemly in the late reform movement age. While most of this would be covered in Vir Singh's lengthy introduction, it was not unusual to find the occasional footnotes lasting several dozen pages.

The iron cladding of a critical apparatus

While Vir Singh likely saw profits from the sales of his publications, monetary gain was clearly not the only impetus for his decade-long project to comment on and publish *Sūraj Prakāsh*. A careful reading of BVS's publication indicates a significant level of advocacy for and promotion of the text and the author Santokh Singh. BVS was in fact not the first to print

Sūraj Prakāśh; in fact, many printers, including Vidiya Press Lahore of Lala Ganga Bishan Malik, were already printing *Sūraj Prakāśh* for decades prior to Vir Singh even thinking about the project. Other concerns, therefore, drove the project.

Vir Singh's father, Dr. Charan Singh, although starting out as a poet greatly interested in Brajbhasha, slowly changed and began writing in Punjabi in the last decade of the nineteenth century. This change was not abnormal and within the first few decades of the twentieth century, virtually no Sikh writer continued to write in Brajbhasha – which had been the language of choice for Sikh authors previously – instead opting for Punjabi. The language politics associated with this change is in no way disconnected from larger discussions about identity, religion, and nationhood but these are beyond the scope of this chapter (Shackle 2001, 108). The shift from Brajbhasha to Punjabi meant that the newer generation, having not learnt Brajbhasha, would not be able to engage in texts like *Sūraj Prakāśh*. For Vir Singh, his publication would reignite and open doors for those readers who weren't trained in Brajbhasha, or experienced enough to read the *larivār*, giving them the ability to enjoy the historical narrative as all previous printed versions of *Sūraj Prakāśh* were in *larivār*.

Problems with the reception of *Sūraj Prakāśh* in some circles were clear to Vir Singh, as evident by his over 250-page introduction. BVS mentions when beginning his task that he was approached by many who suggested the need to cut portions of *Sūraj Prakāśh* in his publication or to add in material to the text. To this, Vir Singh responds, “in the world of literature to do such a thing would be extremely improper” (V. Singh 1989, 10). The analogy then given is that the whole reason why Guru Arjan compiled Sikh scripture was to ensure that the entirety of the Guru's writings could be identified and marked with a stamp of approval. This point is important to note especially because of Vir Singh's previous track record when publishing texts which has only more recently come to light through the work of S.S. Padam and Lou Fenech. BVS in 1912 published a text attributed to Bhai Mani Singh (1644–1734) named *Sikhān Dī Bhagatmālā*, which was republished as a critical edition by S.S. Padam in 2013 utilizing various manuscripts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Padam writes a scathing critique of BVS in the introduction noting how BVS only utilized one manuscript in his publication and noting how several sections were removed with no apparent rhyme or reason (Padam 2013, 22). Noting how *Bhagatmālā* is a source utilized by Santokh Singh, Padam raises the question why BVS felt it necessary to chop out sections of *Bhagatmālā* but leave those related sections within *Sūraj Prakāśh*. Padam notes the connection BVS had within the Singh Sabha but leaves the question to why such editing occurred unanswered.

Fenech (2000) also notes and agrees with other scholars who have identified how BVS removed, edited, and changed verses within *Panth Prakāśh* for the purposes of presenting a much clearer notion of identity

and community of the Sikhs separate from Hindus (H. Singh 1990, 188). If we can take BVS at his word that he did not change anything from *Sūraj Prakāsh* despite the pressure from the community, there could be various reasons why this would be the case: it could represent an evolution in Vir Singh's approach to publishing or reflect the fact that the *Sūraj Prakāsh* was already so widely known and read. This is in stark contrast to *Bhagatmālā* and *Panth Prakāsh*: Dhillon (2004) notes that there were not many extant manuscripts of *Panth Prakāsh*, which is quite different from the situation with *Sūraj Prakāsh*: many handwritten and printed *larivār* editions of *Sūraj Prakāsh* had been produced prior to BVS even endeavoring to publish the text. The fact that *Sūraj Prakāsh* was well known may have forced BVS's hand in maintaining the integrity of the text.¹¹ It also paved the way for Vir Singh's use of extensive footnotes and an elaborate introduction.

There is no doubt that by the time Vir Singh took up the publication of *Sūraj Prakāsh*, there existed a portion of the community which had become uncomfortable with the text, in terms of the identity and reform politics of the Singh Sabha wave. The context from which the text was written in had shifted: no longer were Sikhs the dominant ruling force of the Punjab region, no longer were stories being written drawing connections with Mughal and Vaishnava tropes of kingship and power, nor were Sikhs proficient in the tropes and poetry in Brajbhasha. When this break occurs from the relation between the writer and the audience, textual expressivity is lost (Rao 2001, 5). Even still BVS mentions that despite some level of disconnect, the text clings to the heartstrings of its audience:

Regular people because they cannot understand it easily still feel the effect of it due to its metres and rhyme, and *kathakars* would do the duty of explaining the text. This is why this text became "*sarv priya itihaas*" popular history quickly. For regular people they received this treasure trove of katha. In Gurdwaras, Deras, Dharamsalas, courts and in houses, the katha spread so widely and many copies of this text spread and became established in Gurdwaras. In the late afternoon a tradition started in villages and cities where people would go to Gurdwaras to listen to this katha. This tradition remained alive and withstood the grasp and effect from the Singh Sabha movement.

(V. Singh 1989, 79)

The subtle note about the grasp and effect of the Singh Sabha relays Vir Singh's clear understanding that components of the text appear at odds with the reform movement. The publication itself, along with its lengthy introduction, forms a way to soften the attacks and to shape the audience's expectations, reactions, and modes of appreciation of the text. In this way, Vir Singh was glancing into the future, hoping that through the introduction and a critical apparatus, he could shape the way future generations perceive their heritage. Throughout the publication, one finds rebuttals and

clarifications in a way that prevents this text from being thrown out of use on account of a few portions. There are other components within the text, specifically through the footnotes, that offer the reader some form of comfort if they disagree with the author, Santokh Singh.

The introduction

The introduction first begins describing Vir Singh's conception of history, placing the text within the wider landscape of history as a field of study. To bolster the text from the attacks in the twentieth century, BVS would need to refute the claim from scholars like Macauliffe, who, although utilized and referenced *Sūraj Prakāsh* constantly through his works, wrote:

It is, however, doubtful that Bhai Santokh Singh had access to any trustworthy authority. From his early education and environment he was largely tinctured with Hinduism. He was unquestionably a poet, and his imagination was largely stimulated by copious amounts draughts of bhang and other intoxicants in which he freely indulged. The consequence was that he invented several stories discreditable to the Gurus and their religion. Some of his inventions are due to his exaggerated ideas of prowess and force in a bad as well as in a good cause – a reflex of the spirit of the marauding age in which he lived. His statements accordingly cannot often be accepted as even an approach to history.

(Macauliffe 1909, Ixxvii)

A quarter of BVS's introduction first explores exhaustively a taxonomy of history into five forms of history, then clarifying of which are important for a Sikh. Similar to how his father contended that a novel shouldn't be just for amusement but must serve a higher purpose and meaning, BVS articulates that historical search and engagement should be focused with the purpose of deepening one's connection to the Guru and Gurbani (Singh 1989, 35). By providing this ideological position related to history, BVS then notes that this text is such an engagement, implicitly conveying the importance of such a text.

For BVS, Santokh Singh not only is presenting a historical narrative which will fulfill a Sikh's need to connect deeper to the stories of the Guru but the text possesses all the qualities of good historical scholarship. BVS details how the text provides small glimpses and notes to how dates, eyewitness accounts, comparative materials, etc., were all utilized in the production. BVS identifies two main modes of classification from scientific history, largely associated with the West although examples from India's past are given, and fine art history, *komal unrī itihās*. Within these two, BVS identifies three forever present characteristics but the amount of each will change depending on the format. These three characteristics are literary (*sāhitik*), detail/informational (*brītāntik*), and moral/spiritual

(*adhyātamaik*). Scientific history places more emphasis on the detail and less on the literary or moral; yet, these two characteristics remain in trace amounts. While the fine art history utilizes more the literary and moral characteristics, it still retains characteristics of details and sources. The *Sūraj Prakāsh* represents the fine art history but also another category BVS notes as popular history due to its ability to be engaging with the audiences having spread widely throughout Punjab (V. Singh 1989, 77).

Situating the text within this taxonomy of historiography provides the reader with an understanding that the text is not fiction; it's based on previous sources, eyewitness information, and oral history. One component of the introduction consists of a side-by-side analysis of the materials utilized by Santokh Singh, previous texts from the eighteenth century, where the author clearly is taking from sources as previously mentioned by BVS. This provided one form of reverse engineering, allowing BVS to present how Santokh Singh is being honest and genuine with the sources that he inherited; at times, BVS will often lay the criticism with the previous sources deflecting attention away from Santokh Singh. In dissecting elements of the fine art poetry, BVS provides analogies to architecture and painting styles in *Hind*, which were not understood or appreciated by the Western eye until they were provided with appropriate context. BVS writes that the Taj Mahal first attracted some skeptical thoughts related to the thin towers, *mīnarān*, but when it was explained that the entire structure was fashioned in memory of Shah Jahan's wife Mumtaz, the thin delicate towers made sense to convey feminine attributes. Regarding painting, BVS explains how heavenly damsels, *fariṣhtas*, when depicted are drawn with wings but this is not to say they actually have wings; rather, it is symbolic to convey that they do not travel through the world as humans (V. Singh 1989, 59). This symbolic representation is an important component of poetics and storytelling, to which BVS dedicates nearly 60 pages, detailing and explaining the linguistic, metrical, favors, devices, and select meters of great praise for the Gurus. The push to include this material shows the skill and prowess of Santokh Singh as an author.

Among the discussion related to types of history and historical accuracy included the issue of *karāmāt*, or miracles, which are included in nearly all sections of the text. While BVS presents the text as following many of the required procedures for a sound historical analysis, BVS defends the use of *karāmāt* by distinguishing between what the text is trying to do in comparison with scientific historical literature. *Sūraj Prakāsh*, he writes, is a text which is not just the history of kings but rather one related to spiritual personalities, *rūhāni śakhsīātān*, who act in the world in a way beyond the comprehension of mortals and which require stories which open the locks of the heart (V. Singh 1989, 71). At times, BVS provides references from Western advances in psychology that can explain aspects of life or components of stories which previously were not understood (V. Singh 1989, 68). This acted as a kind of

warning for the reader to soften skepticism regarding the miraculous, supernatural, or unbelievable parts of the text.

Beyond miracles, another component of the text that BVS saw as problematic in historical terms are the various *puranic* references, largely connecting the stories of the Gurus with Krishna and Rama. BVS positions these references as metaphors, used to explain the deeds, role, and powers of the Guru to an audience which are more familiar with these *puranic* stories (V. Singh 1989, 84). BVS dives into Santokh Singh's other writings like his commentary on *Japu Ji*, *Garab Ganjinī* (1829) and *Balmikī Ramāyaṇ* (1834) to clarify the devotional focus and the status of the Devi in a way to explain away components of the *Sūraj Prakāsh*. This shifts away blame from Santokh Singh and BVS states many reasons for this from the drawing from previous sources, writing under the pressure of surrounding Brahmins in Kaithal, and being influenced by his eldest son Ajai Singh, who was a staunch worshiper of the Devi (V. Singh 1989, 169). BVS even mentions Ajai Singh compelling and forcing these stories of the Devi into the text at sword point against his father's will. The effect of all this context provided by BVS removes significant perceived wrongdoing by Santokh Singh in relation to the format of the history, its controversial components, and its inaccuracies.

The Great Poet – *Mahākavī*

In providing context and significant advocacy for the *Sūraj Prakāsh*, BVS dedicates a significant component of the introduction, nearly one third, toward a biography of Santokh Singh also known as the *Mahākavī*, the Great Poet. While the name and fame of Santokh Singh were widely known, with brief mentions about his life in British and Sikh sources, there was no thorough biography of the poet until BVS publishes the text nearly a century after the poet's passing. BVS begins the task by first recognizing that autobiographies were somewhat of a rarity that respected elders would prefer to sit out of the spotlight of attention (V. Singh 1989, 84). Biographies themselves were also rare and BVS notes that many which have been written in the past were merely implanting few facts of the personality depicted but within a genre which largely formed the structure and style of the text. Within the biography and throughout the text itself via the footnotes, BVS stacks significant praise for Santokh Singh and clarifies his philosophical and identarian leanings. A whole section in the introduction is dedicated to clarifying "The Poet's Beloved Master" (*kavī jī dī īśaṭ patī*) which is a collection of passages not only from Santokh Singh's *Sūraj Prakāsh* but also from his *Balmikī Ramāyaṇ* and *Garab Ganjinī Tīkā* (V. Singh 1989, 162). The portion includes clarification and explanations for the passages within the *Sūraj Prakāsh* which praise the Devi in various invocations as a means to enhance the poet's ability to write beautifully, not as a devotional focus

which is *Akāl Purkh* and the Gurus (V. Singh 1989, 165). Within the fifth *rut* among the Vedanta material, BVS includes a footnote writing:

His writings were filled with such praise, faith and devotion to the Guru, in front of which no further proof is required that the Exalted Poet was a fully imbued Gursikh, an esteemed Sikh, and a Gurmukh who was drenched in the love of the Guru.¹²

The biography and praise of Santokh Singh push an implicit and explicit desire to situate the poet firmly within the good graces of the Sikh audience.

BVS's method for conducting research into the life of Santokh Singh shines an interesting light onto the methodology of his scholarship. BVS begins by mentioning how he interacted with many Sikh scholars, canvassing information about the Great Poet's life. In addition to this, BVS leaned on the information possessed by his father, Dr. Charan Singh, who himself had heard many stories related to Santokh Singh during his lifetime (V. Singh 1989, 85). An interesting component of the search for information was BVS traveling to various locations where Santokh Singh lived, wrote, or studied, collecting stories and information. BVS engaged with the descendants of Santokh Singh telling their story and movement across Punjab, showing where they settled after leaving Kaithal. BVS even collected and presented some excerpts of poetry from Santokh Singh's eldest son, Ajai Singh, along with his classmate Megh Singh, who studied under Giani Sant Singh. The biography of Santokh Singh is quite extensive covering the birthplace, early learning, other writings, travels, relationship with various courts, daily activities, writing methodology, what influences were affecting the creation of the text, devotional focus, final trip to Amritsar, students, and poetic qualities. Throughout all these sections, there are generous sections of praise for the Great Poet.

Conclusion

BVS's vision in situating the *Sūraj Prakāsh* and Santokh Singh within the good graces of the Sikh community lives on today, with the text continuing to be read and explained in Gurdwaras in India, Europe, and North America. BVS emerged out of a lineage which was very fond of *Sūraj Prakāsh*, and this surrounding expertise and interest surely benefited the publication endeavor which aimed at safeguarding the text and shaping the audience's interaction with the stories. Utilizing the approach of a text-critical apparatus, BVS situated the *Sūraj Prakāsh* within this armor to guard it from attacks related to historical inaccuracies and philosophical critique. At a time when Western notions of history permeated literary production in Punjab, BVS was able to couch this precolonial text within a Western critical mode of publication, safeguarding and advocating for the text's

historical and religious benefit. The advocacy and great praise for the poet through the introduction and footnotes was a method engaged by BVS to push this text into the next century which was starkly different from the time of Santokh Singh.

Notes

- 1 Santokh Singh wrote a Brajbhasha version of the *Amar Kosh* (1820), the *Nānak Prakāsh* (1824), a Khariboli *Ātma Purān* translation (1828), a commentary on Guru Nanak's Japu named *Garab Ganjini Tikā* (1829), and a Brajbhasha *Bālmiki Ramāyan* (1833).
- 2 Raas 1, [Chapter 5](#), verses 5–8.
- 3 Santokh Singh's *Garab Ganjini Tikā* is a commentary on Guru Nanak's Japu Ji, specifically written to destroy the arrogance of an Udāsī named Anandghan, who had written his own commentary on Japu Ji attributing poetic faults to Guru Nanak.
- 4 This manuscript can be viewed at Panjab Digital Library here: <http://www.panjabdigilib.org/webuser/searches/displayPage.jsp?ID=5848&page=1&CategoryID=3&Searched=> My forthcoming doctoral dissertation will explore early manuscripts and transmission history.
- 5 Syan (2013) writes how different Sikh versions of the Ramayana were vehicles to represent different positions on householder and martial policies between Guru Gobind Singh and Harji.
- 6 A digitized copy of the Fifth Grade reader published in 1893 by Mufid-i-am Press by Munshi Gulab Singh and Sons written by Hazara Singh can be found here: https://archive.org/details/20200124_20200124_0613/mode/2up
- 7 BVS records that Santokh Singh himself didn't handwrite the text but would recite it to four scribes seated nearby.
- 8 BVS's footnote at Rut 5, Chapter 27, verse 22 is an example of this.
- 9 Vir Singh also added these chapter headings in brackets in this 1914 Panth Prakāsh publication.
- 10 An example from the sixth Rās 16th chapter titled, Sri Hargobind's Victory in Battle: *itī sri gurpratapa Sūraj grinte khaṣṭami rāse 'sri hargobinda janga jīta prasanga baranann nām khoḍasamo ansū*.
- 11 Further manuscript research is required to identify if at all there are differences in extant manuscripts.
- 12 Rut 5, chapter 50, verse 20 footnote.

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10 Bhai Vir Singh's Puratan Janamsakhi

Sikh Book Culture and the Historical Turn

Harjeet Singh Grewal

Introduction

Attempts to reinvent a narrative of “Sikhism” – the master conceptual frame for Sikh Studies (Arvindpal Singh Mandair 2009) – are rooted in coloniality and the idealized notions of Sikhism that continue today remain largely based on forms of conjecture inferences made through cursory examination of texts. However, the mechanism and methodologies informing these colonial critics of Sikh textuality remain largely unexamined. Thus, in this chapter I ask, how are *Janamsākhīs* repurposed to create a space for subject self-formation through philosophical transgression during the British Raj in Panjab? Janamsakhis are a distinct genre of Punjabi literature and central to the Sikh tradition. They are found as compendiums that contain anecdotal, analogic, and dialogic narratives about the first Sikh Guru, Nanak Bedī (Grewal 2017). This chapter examines the role of Bhāi Vir Singh's (BVS hereafter) edited Janamsakhi published in 1926, *Hun tak miliān vichon sabh ton Purātan Janam-sakhi Srī Guru Nanak Dev Ji* (PJ hereafter), in shifting and contested understandings of book culture and textuality in the Sikh tradition during the colonial period (B.V. Singh 1926). Using a historicist approach to the past, BVS's edits unintentionally alter the Gursikh-based ontological understanding of textuality from texts possessing embodiment to a more Western understanding of “the book” as an inert object-commodity for sale wherein the author and reader relationship is co-determined by mutually imbricated capital demands. The distinction here is that the Gursikh concept of text requires diminishing *haumai* or the ability of the self to claim objectality. Janamsakhis have a living truth embedded within them through the use of sabds from Sri Guru Granth Sahib (hereafter, SGGS) that enable direct engagement with their textuality – by either audience or author – without intermediation and are facilitated by attainment of a delimited-self. Western hermeneutical approaches construe textuality as an intermediary in the process of communication and meaning making. Circulating texts are central to community formation, making books (and other forms of published text) a vital social commodity circulating in markets. Given that debates about the authenticity of many of the Sikh tradition's early texts persist today, any project seeking to

understand forms of early modern Sikh thought and textuality needs to struggle against the hauntings of these colonial textual formations in the present.

In developing his philology, BVS pursues questions raised earlier by Ernest Trumpp and M.A. Macauliffe. In the early 1870s, Trumpp patronized Sikh intellectuals from Lahore and Amritsar ultimately producing a translation of two Janamsakhi manuscripts procured from the India Office Library (Trumpp 1877). One manuscript made no mention of Bala Sandhu, contained less miraculous material, and was generally better aligned with his Christocentric scholarly expectations about religious biography. Although Bala was a ubiquitous and popular figure in Janasakhis, Trumpp used the less familiar manuscript narrative to question the popular version's authenticity by casting aspersions towards Bala's factuality. This was consistent with Trumpp's biased assumption that Sikhs were unlearned and had lost grasp of the teachings found in Sikh scripture. Trumpp directed his criticism at suggesting that Sikhs had fallen into the very superstitions, legend, and miraculous tales that Sikh scripture tried to raise them out of. Trumpp's comments piqued the interest of Singh Sabha reformers and they began to search for variant iterations of the Janamsakhi narrative (B.V. Singh 1926). Within a decade, M.A. Macauliffe and his native informant, Professor Gurmukh Singh from Oriental College Lahore, located and edited another manuscript that resembled the more "authentic" Janamsakhi without Bala. Rather than translate the manuscript into English, Macauliffe chose to use the capacities of his native informant to publish a critical edition entitled, *The Most Ancient Biography of Baba Nanak, The Founder of the Sikh Religion*, for a largely Panjabi-Sikh audience by critically editing the text but retaining the *gurmukhī* script (Macauliffe 1885). This ensured that questions about authenticity would circulate and spread predominantly within the Sikh community, spreading doubts about the validity of Sikh texts. The manuscripts used by Trumpp and Macauliffe became known as the *valaitvālī* and the *hafizabādvālī*, respectively – they remain seminal to the notion of a puratan Janamsakhi tradition, a term coined in the work of W.H. McLeod (W. H. McLeod 1980). Indeed, BVS's back translation of "most ancient" into Panjabi as *purātan* allows for the continued questioning of Bala's authenticity while attempting to embark on a return to the "original" teachings of the Sikh Gurus.

BVS expands the trajectory of Trumpp and Macauliffe's criticism using the philological method of textual criticism and higher criticism to facilitate a philosophical transgression. Such transgressive acts occur when an idealized sense of what a text "should be" overrides the philological study of the text's materiality "as it is." The transgression functions to shift the Sikh intellectual and praxical world toward ideology and doxa by which subject formation, or interpellation, occurs (Gasparov 2015). I argue that BVS's *PJ* creates this transgressive act through the critical edits and paratextual marginalia to facilitate an alternate route for what "text" may mean and, at the same time, introducing and avowedly encouraging new reading practices that emphasize self-cultivation.

The question I pursue in this chapter is informed by considering why the interest in textual authenticity not only begins but flourishes after the Kingdom of Maharaja Ranjit Singh is annexed by the British. I examine Macauliffe-Gurmukh Singh and, later, BVS's use of a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1970) driven by coloniality when producing critical editions of the Janamsakhi. The transgressive editions' alteration of Sikh thought begins by back translating "authentic" as "puratan" and, thereby, basing their critical edits on an idealized past. BVS's popular and long-standing *PJ* enacts the philosophical transgression to functionalize what Derrida, in his essay, "Hostipitality," called a "substituion." Through substitution the question of fidelity, or authenticity, is possible. However, in order for the substitution to function one has to already be separated from the thing being substituted (Derrida 2002). This substitution requires a philosophical transgression through Janamsakhis because its subject matter is Guru Nanak – the Sikh tradition's founder. The transgression separates an imagined futural Sikh readership from its historicity, or living past, with an ideologically cleansed past through the editing logic. Ultimately, the epistemological worldview behind Janamsakhi literature is transformed encouraging Sikhs to embrace the pursuit of life, or *Lebensphilosophie*, using a so-called modern, or Eurocentric; a subjectivity that is situated in temporality and privatized ratiocinative norms. Substitution is possible only after the guest and host dynamic is inverted in a context physical warfare prior to Panjab's annexation and continued oppression, signifying that the guest – or the British – is now host, or master. This violence creates the conditions of fear and doubt that can rupture a community from its internally developed modes of thought and comportment.

In the first section, I examine the prefaces of both critical editions to show how they make two impacts on Gursikh concepts of textuality or the writing of Sikh thought: (1) they facilitate a ratiocinating reading process and (2) they deemphasize the primacy of gurbānī, the language of the SGGS. Together, this alters poesis or the ways of bringing forth a Gursikh ontic through gurbānī, allowing the text to instead produce subjectivities that privilege reason and inference to assess the author's religiosity and engage the reader's historicist sensibility. BVS edits the Janamsakhi with the view towards granting readers access to the moment of Sikh origin; doing so requires using the text as an intermediary in Sikh subject formation. However, given the colonial context of the ideational rendering of Sikh doctrine, a substitution is required that alters the janamsakhi's narrative making it resemble historical narrative time (Ricoeur 1988). This logic privileges the temporalization of events and focuses on an archetype of Sikh character that reproduces or interpellates an ideologically correct portrayal of the founder's persona (Althusser 1984). These changes embed an alternate colonial narrative logos and epistemology within the *PJ* that aligns Sikh textuality to an emerging educated ecumenical class

(Oberoi 2010). In the preface to *PJ*, instead of understanding the text as an attempt to extend Gurbani's affect during katha performances or develop Sikh concepts, readers are encouraged to evaluate and be critical of the depiction of past events from Guru Nanak's life. The use of historical imagination instead of deploying multiple modes of narrative time simultaneously in a text becomes, and remains, a point of contestation for the Sikh post-colonial condition about how to verifiably reproduce Sikh identity. Thus, I argue, decolonizing begins by understanding the types of philosophical transgression enabled through philology during the colonial period.

In the next section, I discuss a *sākhī* that BVS titles, "Sākhī 51: The fourth Udāsī toward the West, Mecca," (B.V. Singh 1926, 182–191). This *sākhī* narrates Nanak's arrival at Mecca, when he falls asleep with his feet towards the Ka 'bah. As the Qazi of Mecca, Rukn-dīn, prepares for his morning prayer, he happens upon the slumbering Nanak and scolds Nanak for having his feet towards the house of God. He grabs Nanak's feet to move them away from the Ka 'bah and witnesses the Ka 'bah reposition itself to wherever Nanak's feet are (B.V. Singh 1926). Post-colonial debates about *sakhis* like "Sākhī 51" centre around where this event occurred – whether Nanak could actually have travelled to Mecca or whether the *sakhi* is accounting a miracle. The value of *Janamsakhi* narrative is reduced to its ability to recount verifiable facts about Nanak's life or the Sikh community's early development in order to give Sikhs a certifiable source for identity formation (W. H. McLeod 1980; H. Singh 1969; K. Singh 1969).

BVS relies on higher criticism to historically contextualize *Sākhī 51*. However, the edited text either alters several poetic expressions by Nanak or does not present them in their entirety. Perceived miraculous aspects are also relegated to the paratextual apparatus or detracted from using parenthetical remarks. Counterintuitively, omission prevents the very critical engagement and assessment of the *sakhi* that BVS requests his reader to engage in. I suggest that these editorial decisions precondition later debates around the validity of events while missing, or preventing, deeper philosophical and conceptual engagement with *Janamsakhis*. These edits colonize the text and bring it within the ambit of historical time and readers are estranged from the Gursikh epistemological framework that the *janamsakhis* functioned within.

My analysis looks at the substitutions made to *Sākhī 51* to have it appear less miraculous and correct perceived errors in the narrative. These substitutions make a modern self-conscious readership feel at home within the text. When the *sakhi* narratives do not accord with the ideational colonial rendering of Sikhism, a substitution is required – a correction which despite itself distantiates the reader from the *sakhi*'s narrative time and epistemology under the pretence of enhancing textual fidelity. In this way,

the philosophical transgression produced by BVS represents what Ricœur called “the essential nature of forgetting,” a search prompted by fear of having forgotten and the inability to determine whether forgetting is a permanent erasure or a temporary obstacle (Ricœur 2004). My analysis of the textual substitutions help reclaim Sikh epistemology by overcoming colonial attempts at epistemicide (Santos 2013, 2018) – or the destruction (and substitution under the same name) of Sikh knowledge.

Grammar and structure in Macauliffe and Vīr Singh’s critical Janamsakhi editions

This section examines the philosophical transgression that occurs through the *PJ* by looking at a network of translation and edits linking Trumpp, Macauliffe, Gurmukh Singh, and BVS’s recreations of the Janamsakhi. Gurmukh Singh, M.A. Macauliffe, and BVS are amongst reformers who take up philology and respond to Trumpp’s musings about the Janamsakhi. They are inspired to find or produce *ipso facto* an urtext from which all janamsakhis could be derived. They begin to imagine a more ancient, foundational, and “pure” Janamsakhi (Singh 1926; Trumpp 1877, ii). By examining how philology was employed to create critically edited Janamsakhis, I follow a recent suggestion made by Murphy that by studying colonial knowledge production we may be in a position to better locate what was and what was not “new” in Sikh literature, including its historiography (Murphy 2017). However, my own interest stems from the diversity and plurality of Sikh literature’s inheritances to determine more clearly how earlier avoidances were altered and reneged upon. I mean to say that Sikh literateurs chose to avoid certain genres of writing although they appear to be familiar with such literature from other traditions. What prompts the embrace of colonial, imperialist, registers of intellection? It is useful to examine the changes in these critically edited volumes to help understand how the process of philosophical transgression subjects Sikh textuality to imperialist notions of historical narrative time.

Ernest Trumpp’s infamous role as the first translator of *Adi Granth* is well documented, and his role in provoking Sikh religious reformism has been a point of recent discussion (Barrier 1978; Arvind Singh Mandair 2005; Oberoi 1994; Sahota 2022; T. Singh 1994). Trumpp’s translation of the *Adi Granth* continues to evoke comment by scholars; it is rarely remarked upon that Trumpp is also the first amongst a small number of academics to have translated two janamsakhi manuscripts. One recension, later known as the *valait-vālī*, inspires BVS to create the *PJ*. Trumpp’s impact in translating these two janamsakhis was more direct and, arguably, had an equally significant impact on enacting the process of religion-making upon the Sikh tradition (Dressler and Mandair 2011). Trumpp’s remarks about Sikhs having lost any knowledge of their sacred text and his imaginative remark about a more “authentic”

tradition for interpreting the *Adi Granth*, however, are based on recognizing the prevalent use of stories, fables, or sakhis rather than direct interpretation of the Granth (Grewal 2017). For Trumpp, the “biographies” of Guru Nanak are told as substitutions for interpretation of “scripture” and, therefore, reflect a lack of knowledge. His criticism of common stories as substitutions for sophisticated interpretation provokes what Mandair refers to as the evolution of “reformist theology.” This theology is driven by two things: (1) “perceived difference between Indic and European notions of time and ontology,” and (2) “the mimetic co-figuration of this difference as identity” (Mandair 2009, 194). If we reconnect Trumpp’s act of translating the *Adi Granth* and the *Janamsakhi* as a singular event, the reactive substitutive philological acts of transgression by Sikh ecumenical classes can be read as the co-figuration of difference as identity.

The process of alteration begins with Trumpp’s translation of the word *Janamsakhi* itself. Trumpp interrupts the term “*janamsakhi*” by hyphenating it – thus, “*janam-sākhi*” translates seamlessly as “life-stories” (Trumpp 1877, i). This translation naturalizes the genre of biography, allowing it to replace “old” historiographical time as a function of “witness” to temporal historical time. The subsequent editorial work by Macauliffe and BVS imagines an earlier doctrinally pure *purātan* tradition to envision an originalist typology for the sign, “Sikh” based on Nanak as founder of a religion by naturalizing the category of biography. Coincident to this is the shift of *gurmāt* from intellection to theological doctrine discussed by Mandair. The title of Gurmukh Singh and M.A. Macauliffe’s critical edition of the hafizabadvali *janamsakhi*, *The most Ancient Biography of Baba Nanak, the Founder of the Sikh Religion*, relies on fidelity to regain purity through the genre of historical biography (Macauliffe 1885). The prefaces to Macauliffe and BVS’s critical editions call upon a new readership to engage in self-reflection – a new phenomenological experience away from the oral performance of *Janamsakhis* during *katha* (Grewal 2017). The prefatorial essay by Gurmukh Singh states that European hermeneutical and philological methods can help the Sikh community recover from its lack of knowledge (Macauliffe 1885). Gurmukh Singh intimates how this realization occurred at the prompting of Macauliffe. It places colonizers in the role of saviours of Indic knowledge. It is an initial attempt to employ the potential of philology for a philosophically (or theologically) transgressive function by ecumenical Sikh reformers (Macauliffe 1885; Singh 1926).

In the preface to his edited *Janamsakhi*, Gurmukh Singh narrates how the British gave a single copy of Trumpp’s translation of four *rāgas* from the *Ādi Granth* to the Lāhore Singh Sabhā to assess its veracity. While doing so, Singh Sabhā members became interested in Trumpp’s translation of the *valaitvālī*. Gurmukh Singh writes:

...ਏਕ ਜਿਲਦ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਭਾ ਲਾਹੌਰ ਨੂੰ ਗਵਰਨਮਿੰਟ ਵਿਚੋਂ ਮਿਲੀ, ਕਿ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਭਾ ਇਸ ਕੀਆਂ ਅਸੁੱਧੀਆਂ ਦੇਖੇ. ਗ੍ਰੰਥ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਦੇ ਤਰਜਮੇ ਪੜਨ ਵਿੱਚ ਉਸ ਸਾਖੀ ਦਾ ਤਰਜਮਾ ਡਿੱਠਾ, ਜਿਸ ਦਾ ਹੋਰਨਾਂ ਨਾਲੋਂ ਭਿੰਨ ਆਸਾਯ ਥਾ...ਔਰ ਸ੍ਰੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਸਿੰਘ ਸਭਾ ਲਾਹੌਰ ਨੇ ਇਕ ਸਾਖੀ ਨੂੰ ਛਪਾਯਾ ਅਤੇ

ਪ੍ਰਗਟ ਕੀਤਾ...ਔਰ ਇਸ ਸੇ ਥੋੜੇ ਦਿਨੋਂ ਕੇ ਅੰਦਰ ਹੀਂ ਇਸ ਨਾਲ ਦੀਆਂ ਬਹੁਤ ਸਾਖੀਆਂ ਹੱਥ ਆ ਗਈਆਂ.

...One copy was given to the Lahore Singh Sabha by the government so that the Singh Sabha could comments on its deficiencies. While examining the translation of the Granth Sahib, the janamsakhi translation that was distinct from other known versions was noticed...Within a few days, the Sri Gur Singh Sabha Lahore published a copy of this sākhi bringing it back in circulation.

(Macauliffe 1885, 4)

The coloniality of Sikh ecumenes and connection to the government give them access to the *valaitvālī* Janamsakhi prompting their search for manuscript.

This quote suggests that the members of the Lahore Singh Sabhā were unaware of versions of Janamsakhis without Bālā Sandhu as a character. It speaks to the commonality of Bala Janamsakhis and raises questions about the provenance of the puratan editions. Gurmukh Singh's comments show how the consciousness of Sikh ecumenes was impacted by the structures of colonial governance. Educated in the colonial system of knowledge production, these ecumenes became interested in verifying Trumpp's English commentary about an "authentic" Janamsakhi representing original forms of Sikh intellection. Therefore, as Oberoi has argued, they sought to pragmatically make use of colonial technologies of dissemination for their own reformist purposes (Oberoi 1994).

Gurmukh Singh recognizes that the Lahore Singh Sabha was intrigued by the suggestion of a distinct Janamsakhi manuscript recension. The significant impact Macauliffe had on the mind of Gurmukh Singh is seen in the preface and shows that his role extended beyond financing the project as he claimed. Singh discusses how Macauliffe hoped this version of the Janamsakhi would prompt a new understanding of what a book was in Punjābī culture. Gurmukh Singh states that Macauliffe edited the *hafizābādvālī sākhi* as a model for how Panjābī publications should be structured. Singh states the following:

ਸਾਹਬਿ ਨੈ ਏਨ ਸਾਖੀ ਇਕ ਨਮੂਨੇ ਦੇ ਤੌਰ ਪਰ ਛਪਵਾਈ ਹੈ, ਕਿ ਅਗੇ ਕੋ ਹੋਰ ਪੁਸਤਕ ਗੁਰਮੁਖੀ ਕੇ ਏਸੇ ਰੀਤੀ ਨਾਲ ਛਪਨ, ਜਿਸ ਸੇ ਸਭ ਕੋ ਬਢੇ ਲਾਭ ਕੀ ਪ੍ਰਾਪਤੀ ਹੋਵੈ...ਹੁਨ ਏਹ ਜਨਮਸਾਖੀ ਕੀ ਪੁਸਤਕ ਤਿਆਰ ਹੋ ਗਈ; ਅਤੇ ਹਰ ਇਕ ਸਖਸ ਨੂੰ ਪਤਾ ਕਰ ਹੋਰਨਾ ਸਾਖੀਆਂ ਨਾਲ ਮੁਕਾਬਲਾ ਕਰ ਸਕਦੇ ਹੋਨ, ਅਤੇ ਇਕ ਦੂਸਰੇ ਦਾ ਸਚ ਝੂਠ ਜਾਨ ਸਕਦੇ ਹੋਨ.

Sir [Macauliffe] has published this sākhi as an example so that in the future books in Gurmukhī will also be published along these lines. Following this model will reap great benefits...Now, this janamsakhi is completed; and every individual, having read it, can compare it with others [Janamsakhis], and can determine what is true and false.

(Macauliffe 1885, 4)

Although there is no recreation of actual dialogues, Macauliffe's influence on Gurmukh Singh is clear; the benefits of adopting English notions of what a book is materially, structurally, and in its content as part of the critical apparatus of the edited hafizabadvali come to Gurmukh Singh from Macauliffe. Changes to Janamsakhi to mimic the paradigm of a European book enhanced the unassisted – and therefore, autodialogic – readability of a text. This increased the reader's discerning judgement – ratiocinative factors contributing to producing subjective colonial perspectives about Guru Nanak and Sikh history.

The critically edited *hafizābādvalī* also incorporates English grammatical marks and, through other structural innovations, tries to distinguish between narrative, poetry, speech, and authorial interpretation. Long poetic works that were attributed to Nanak but not in the *Guru Granth Sahib* such as *jugāwālī*, *prān sanglī*, and *āsā rāg dī patī* were left out because readers could access them in the recently produced *valaitvālī* lithograph (Macauliffe 1885). These changes made up for the deficiencies of contemporary Sikh textuality. Gurmukh Singh states the problem in this way:

ਅੱਜ ਤਕ ਸਾਡੇ ਵਿਚ ਗੁੰਝਾ ਦੇ ਲਿਖਨ ਦਾ ਜੋ ਤਰੀਕਾ ਹੈ, ਸੋ ਐਸਾ ਨਹੀਂ ਜਿਸ ਤੇ ਹਰ ਇਕ ਸਖਸ ਅਸਾਨੀ ਨਾਲ ਕਿਸੀ ਗੁੰਝ ਨੂੰ ਪੜ ਸਕੇ. ਕਯੋਕਿ ਅਖਰ ਇਕ ਦੂਸਰੇ ਨਾਲ ਮਿਲੇ ਹੁਏ ਹੁੰਦੇ ਹਨ, ਜਿਸ ਸੇ ਪਾਠਕ ਨੂੰ ਇਹ ਨਹੀ ਮਾਲੂਮ ਹੁੰਦਾ ਕਿ ਕੇਹੜਾ ਅਖਰ ਅੱਗੇ ਪਿਛੇ ਕਰ ਕਹ ਕੇ ਪੜਨਾ ਹੈ. ਔਰ ਵਾਰਤਿਕ ਕਥਨ ਨੂੰ ਕਵਤਾ ਨਾਲ ਹੀ ਰਲਾ ਕੇ ਲਿਖ ਦੇਂਦੇ ਹਨ... ਇਸ ਸਾਖੀ ਨੂੰ ਨਵੀਨ ਰੀਤੀ ਸੋ ਲਿਖ ਕਰ ਛਪਾਯਾ ਹੈ... ਪੜ੍ਹਨ ਵਿਚ ਜੋ ਸੁਗਮਤਾ ਹੈ, ਸੋ ਆਪੇ ਪਈ ਦਿਸਦੀ ਹੈ. ਜਹਾ ਜਹਾ ਸਬਦ ਆਏ ਹਨ, ਸੋ ਵਾਰਤਿਕ ਨਾਲੋਂ ਬਿਲਕੁਲ ਜੁਦੇ ਕੀਤੇ ਗਏ ਹਨ, ਅਤੇ ਐਸੀ ਰੀਤੀ ਸੋ ਲਿਖੇ ਹੈ, ਕਿ ਆਪ ਹੀ ਵੇਹ ਵਾਰਤਿਕ ਸੋ ਜੁਦੇ ਮਾਲੂਮ ਹੋਵੈ.

The method of writing used until now in our books was such that it was not possible that every person could easily read any book. This was because the letters were written continually so that readers could not tell which letter followed or preceded [to create words]. Prose and poetry were also written together...Macauliffe has had this sākhi written and published in a new fashion... [so that it might] be read with greater ease in the manner which it appears before you. Wherever a sabd has been quoted it is now completely separated from the prose and it has been produced such that one can immediately notice that the prose and poetry are deemed distinct.

(Macauliffe 1885)

Singh's dialogue with Macauliffe reveals an imperialist dictum that modern texts obey the conventions and norms of English. It could not have been the case that those proficient in reading traditional Gurmukhī texts would have struggled with the conventional Panjābī textual format. It is more likely that the new methods of reading are connected to advances in the circulation of texts because print culture brought texts within the ambit of a new reading public. This public, as Macauliffe recognized, was more familiar with the

English book format because traditional Panjābī texts were performed in sangats or studied by adepts until the colonial encounter. A *navīn rītī*, or new format, was thought to provide a self-evident phenomenal experience of reading, where interpretability could occur concurrently with an act of reading itself. In this way, philology renders the critically edited old or “most ancient” Janamsakhi into a new format meant to substitute what was there before and is thought to be irrelevant. Thus, these early changes seem insignificant or benign to our sensibilities, but reveal the restructuring of textuality to adapt to autodiallogic reading and evaluating norms introduced through European forms of education. An autodiallogic process of engagement is emerging through colonial encounters that allow individual readers to participate in the illusion of dialogue where internal interlocution facilitates self-becoming.

This impact can be read between the prefaces of both Macauliffe’s and BVS’s *Janamsakhi*. There is a dynamic process of textual formation that occurs between BVS, his predecessors, and the *PJ*’s imagined future readership. BVS recognizes the works of both Gurmukh Singh and Karam Singh Historian as important antecedents to his work on the Janamsakhi. There were several innovations made in the *PJ* to facilitate ease of reading based upon contemporary ideas of writing. This network facilitates autodialogue and self-cultivation by linking acts of reading to scepticism levelled at narrative. Like Gurmukh Singh, Vīr Singh accepts the need to alter Janamsakhi textuality through a mirror of Anglophonic norms under the pretence of facilitating ease of reading and meaning production. For instance, he uses phrases like, “ਜੋ ਪਾਠ ਸੁੱਧ ਸਮਝ ਪਵੇ,” or “ਜਿਸ ਤੋਂ ਪਾਠਕਾ ਨੂਸ ਇਸ ਗੱਲ ਦੇ ਸੁਗਮਤਾ ਹੋ ਜਾਵੇ,” and “ਪਾਠਕਾਂ ਦੀ ਸੁਖੈਨਤਾ ਵਾਸਤੇ ਹਨ,” to reassure a developing modern readership the text’s structure has been aligned to a growing expectation to actively question and scrutinize such texts (Singh 1926, 9–11).

In the section entitled, “ਇਸ ਪੋਥੀ ਵਿਚ ਜੋ ਕੁਝ ਅਸਾਂ ਕੀਤਾ ਹੈ ਉਸ ਦਾ ਵੇਰਵਾ ਇਹ ਹੈ,” Vīr Singh outlines the editorial changes he uses to reconstruct the *PJ* and gives his primary sources (Ibid). The *PJ* is reconstructed by comparing the photo zincograph commissioned by the colonial administration of the valaitvālī, the “*pathar chāp*” of this manuscript made by the Lāhore Singh Sabha, and the lithographed *hafizābādvālī* manuscript discovered by Gurmukh Singh. Differences are given in footnotes unless they were deemed insignificant (ਗੈਰ ਜ਼ਰੂਰੀ ਫਰਕ) with the photo zincograph acting as the root text. Vīr Singh added sākhis unique to the copied Hafizābādvālī, effectively collapsing differences between the two recensions to create a singular text. Thus, the valait-vālī, or Mss Panjābī B6 that is currently housed in the British Library, becomes the *urtext* and remains the only one accessible in manuscript form.

Vīr Singh corrected the grammar and added punctuation marks like commas, question marks, and colons. The *bindī* and *adhak* were also added. Pagination was altered to reflect consecutive numbering on each page

recto-verso rather than the manuscript practice of only numbering every folio. Following the precedent set by Gurmukh Singh, *sākhīs* are numbered and subheadings in bold are added to indicate the beginning of each *udāsī* (sojourn). BVS acknowledges that some of these changes, such as the inclusion of titles, were at the behest of his Punjabi audience. Furthermore, the longer extra-scriptural poetic works like *jugāvālī* and *prān sanglī* remain omitted from the main text. BVS goes further than Gurmukh Singh by providing brief passages from each in appendices. He rationalizes his omission arguing that if Guru Arjan had not determined these works to be spurious he would have included them in *SGGS*. Likewise, he reasons, they should not be in the *Janamsakhi*. In the second edition, further changes were made, providing titles alongside each numbered *sākhī*, and adding a table of contents (*Ibid*). These changes taken together produced the grammatical and structural contours within which the “life of Nanak,” or biography, could be formatted and read for autobiographical purposes of producing an idealized life of the founder to base Sikh identity upon.

Critical awareness about reading, autodialogue, and self-cultivation helps me reconsider philological exercises conducted on the *Hafizābādvālī* and *Valaitvālī Janamsakhis* by Gurmukh Singh and BVS. The philosophical transgression facilitates autodiologic reading of internalized interlocution and understanding while trying to direct it to engage *gurmat* through the structural events and, later, grammatical re-ordering. Gasparov calls autodialogue “the illusion of dialogue,” that assists in conceptualizing literature as “the book of our life” and facilitates the creation of associated genres and the notions of authorship through a typology that is similar to Jung’s notion of the archetype – inherited, universally applicable, and timeless models or images (Dohe 2016; Roesler 2022).

Autodialogue is based on the internalization of dialogue within the conscious mind where people make sense of “ordinary happenings” and “religious miracles” (Josephs and Valsiner 1998; Madsen, Mihalits, and Tateo 2019). Engagement with a “text-interlocutor” is turned into a phenomenon occurring inside an individual that effectively reduces the text to an inert intermediary between the individual and their consciousness. Text or author loses significance in and of themselves but gain significance by producing “the self” through autodialogue. Autodialogue is an internalization of dialogue that uses an intermediary text-object as a link to an imagined past based upon archetypes so as to replicate those archetypes. The act of reading becomes ideological through autodialogue, and the past is created through an illusory fixation with the present state of the self. In this way, “History” expropriates and silences the text’s shared time in the present and the immediacy of its phenomenological impact as a thing is denied vouchsafing self-conscious subjective formation (Gasparov 2015).

When engaging in their philological exercises, both Macauliffe and BVS use a hermeneutics of suspicion towards the so-called superstitious, legendary, and miraculous material. Removing this inauthentic material is thought

to purify the text and return it to its correct narrative mode through historical time. BVS's ability and encouragement to scrutinize the text reflects the burgeoning self-conscious becoming of a new Sikh readership producing its image by altering an older textual logic. This remains within the broader colonial imagining of Sikhism that begins with Trumpp's translation of Janamsakhi sans miracles. The structure of Janamsakhis changes to facilitate critical reflection and introspection with guidance from Macauliffe.

Where colonizers like Macauliffe first implored Sikhs to cultivate a sense of self through scrutinizing the text in an autodialogic manner, within half a century Sikhs like BVS are changing the structure of the Janamsakhis to reflect European norms for "the book." Notions of self-cultivation ensure that there is a sense of an idealized foundation for the Sikh community – one invented in the colonial encounter and projected upon the past. Ecumenical reformists believed this would purify perceived doctrinal inconsistency and reveal a historical authentic identity. Janamsakhi were poised for such transgressive methods because Trumpp's "life of Nanak" translation made them Sikhism's foundational biography. Correcting the history of Nanak's life corrected the foundational narrative of Sikh identity. Based on the structural and grammatical translation, the ideological driver of autodialogic reading takes shape to help Singh Sabhites try to create narratives that would predictably produce a unique sense of Sikh identity.

Reading the structural and grammatical changes to "Sākhī 51"

As mentioned above, the title, "Sākhī 51" is part of Vīr Singh's alteration of the Janamsakhi manuscript's structure. Titles given by BVS help to give a new novel-like structure to the *PJ*. This is based upon European notions of how to signal a break in the narrative – a subheading or title should be provided, the lettering should be distinct, and numbering should appear. In Janamsakhi manuscripts, it is normative to have numbering at the end of a sakhi and, prior to this, the phrase "*sākhī sampūran hoī*" – the sakhi is complete – is typically given (Mss Panjābī B6, Janamsākhī). Based upon this norm, "Sākhī 51" is not a sākhī; rather, it is part of a larger narrative sequence. These sequences establish opportunities for dialogic encounters between Nanak and an interlocutor (Grewal 2017). The sakhi creates a contest for the expression of a sabd, but this does not necessitate scepticism about whether an event happened nor does this indicate the writer was portraying a "miracle." However, as I show in this section, Vīr Singh's edits suggest a colonial anxiety connected to distinguishing miracles and superstitions from facts.

The narrative of "Sakhi 51" begins as Nanak departs on his next sojourn and is meant to challenge, not reaffirm, assumptions based on archetypes of piety and the forms of hagiography that became paradigmatic in early

modern South Asia (Barz 1994; Callewaert 2000; Hegarty 2009; W.H. McLeod 1994; Novetzke 2007; Rinehart 1999; Steinfels 2004) As per Sikh epistemology, sakhi narrative sequences provide a mirror for possible dialogues between a trained expert, or *giānī*, and everyday sangat members (Grewal 2017). This is reflected in the beginning of the fourth *udāsī*. As I mentioned earlier, there is no title for this or any other sakhi. This sakhi sequence begins with the phrase, *cauthī udāsī pacham kī hoī* (Mss Panjābī B6, Janamsākhi). This phrase alongside a sartorial change in Nanak's appearance let readers, kathāvācak orators, and audiences know that the narrative has shifted and a new sakhi sequence has started. Finding himself with a group of pilgrims heading to Mecca, Nanak has a brief discussion with a pilgrim going to Mecca described simply as a Hajjī. Their discussion (*gosti*) is prompted by the Hajjī who asks Nanak whether he is Muslim or Hindu. The sequence ends when the Hajjī regrets his inability to recognize Nanak as a great exponent of Oneness. The narrative elements and figurative language are meant to provoke an affective response from those engaging in the narrative and prompt questions. Thus, important questions and dialogues in real-time may have been produced after the performance of such sequences. Recognizing these narrative elements requires us to reconsider the function of the literary alongside the historical language in sakhis (Grewal 2017).

As Nanak enters Mecca alone, contemporary audiences perceive that movement of the Ka 'bah is "miraculous," and meant to reaffirm legendary or mythic narrative frameworks (W.H. McLeod 1980; 1968). After the spectacle, a surprised Rukndīn asks the stranger his name. Nanak replies with a sabd that is not from the SGGS. Hearing this sabd causes Rukndīn to bow (*salāmat karnī*) before Nanak and exclaim that he has met a true faqīr of the Self-Arisen (*khudāe*). He tells others about Nanak's presence in Mecca, including Pīr Patalīe who also desires to meet Nanak. The two men return to the meeting place and begin a discussion with Nanak; at this point, a third sequence is demarcated in the narrative using the term *gosti*, or dialogue – *gost mahallā 1 kījī rukndīnī kai parthāe hoī*. Pīr Patalīe asks one question prior to the *gosti* with Rukndīn. The *gosti* contains three questions posed by Rukndīn, each being answered by Nanak in verse. The *gosti* occurs partly out of recognition of Nanak as he was – a true *faqīr* of the Self-Arisen – signalling that recognition was a precursor to dialogic encounters (B.V. Singh 1926).

The above *sākhīs* are distinctly framed sections of the manuscript narrative (Mss Panjābī B6, Janamsākhi) but they get combined in BVS's *PJ* under the title, "Sākhī 51." BVS strides ahead of his predecessors by adding copious footnotes to the *PJ* using two symbols, "†" and "*, " throughout. These are used to signify different types of commentary meant to facilitate greater scrutiny and critical reading. This is especially important for initiating a readership unaccustomed to the network of inter-textual references moving through early Sikh textuality (B.V. Singh 1926).

Both types of footnotes engage with questions of origin and authenticity. Although it is not explicitly stated in the prefaces, the “*” informs readers about authentic or inauthentic verses given in the Janamsakhi using the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* as the point of origin – it is at times also used to provide lexicographic commentary of unfamiliar or antiquated terms. The “†” system of notation signals a comment regarding the historical narrative of events – most of which question the occurrence of miracles, locations visited, or chronological sequence of Nanak’s movement through dateable historical time.

This system provides a vital point of reference for the self-cultivational and first-reading principles desired in modern reading practices (Alves 2019; Bruford 1975; Herdt 2019). Readers attach themselves to the auto-dialogic circuit of self-formation. They are reminded in the preface by BVS to be discerning and rational in their reading of the Janamsakhi. These remarks suggest that BVS believes conscious, self-reflexive awareness of a Sikh archetype could form through modern reading practices. However, his use of philology to enact a philosophical transgression relies on reinventing the Janamsakhi, a primary source constructed upon SGGs and Bhāi Gurdās’ poetry. BVS, therefore, uses modern ideas of scripture and exegesis to drive the reader’s discernment philosophically. By doing so, the philological engagement of the text “as it is” gets overridden by philosophical engagement with what the text *should* represent. The idealized and always spectral referent is the idealized typology of exclusivist Sikh religious identity believed to form through cognitive engagement with BVS’s paratextual marginalia. In order to enact this transgression, readers need to disassociate themselves from preceding methods of narrative engagement: they had to doubt the text’s logos to forget earlier reading practices and form an exclusivist colonial religious identity.

BVS’s paratextual apparatus is essential to his philosophical transgression because it enables the search for identity prompted by the fear of forgetting Ricœur describes and, in doing so, facilitates a hermeneutics of scepticism. For instance, in a detailed and lengthy “†” notation for Sākhī 51, the reader is prompted to consider how event-based empiricism should be assessed while reading the Janamsakhi (Singh 1926, 184–189). The note begins when the narrative sequence shifts with Nanak entering Mecca and going to sleep. It stretches across five pages, often taking up more than three-quarters of the page while using a font several sizes smaller than the main typeset. Much of the note reproduces Bhāi Gurdās’ *pehlī vār* stanzas 32 to 45 (Gurdas 1998).

In the twentieth century, this *vār* was taken up by reformers as the earliest text for “the life of Nanak,” qualifying it as Janamsakhi. BVS prefaces this insertion in the following way:

ਭਾਈ ਗੁਰਦਾਸ ਜੀ ਤੀਸਰੀ, ਚੌਥੀ, ਪੰਜਵੀਂ ਤੇ ਛੇਵੀਂ ਪਾਤਸ਼ਾਹੀ ਦੇ ਸਮੇਂ ਪ੍ਰਸਿੱਧ ਗੁਰਸਿੱਖ, ਲਿਖਾਰੀ, ਕਵੀ, ਤੇ ਮਹਾਨ ਗੁਰਮੁਖ ਹੋਏ ਹਨ: ਇਸ ਵੇਲੇ ਦੇ ਮੁਤਅਲਕ ਜੋ ਕੁਛ ਉਹ ਲਿਖ ਗਏ ਹਨ, ਸੋ ਇਸ ਪੋਥੀ ਤੋਂ ਮੁਹਰਲੀ ਵਾਕਫੀ ਹੈ। ਇਸ ਲਈ ਉਹਨਾਂ ਦਾ ਲੇਖ ਏਥੇ ਦੇਣਾ ਪਾਠਕਾਂ ਨੂੰ ਉਸ ਵੇਲੇ ਦੇ ਹਾਲਾਤ

ਵਧੀਕ ਪੁਰਾਣੇ ਤੇ ਸੱਚੇ ਮਾਲੂਮ ਕਰਨ ਵਿੱਚ ਸਹਾਈ ਹੋਊ।... ਇਸ ਤੋਂ ਪਤਾ ਲਗਦਾ ਹੈ ਕਿ ਸਿਧ ਗੋਸਟ ਏਥੇ। ਅਚਲ ਵਟਾਲੇ॥ ਹੀ ਹੋਈ... ਅਕਸਰ ਗਯਾਨੀ ਭੁੱਲ ਕਰਦੇ ਆਏ ਹਨ ਕਿ ‘ਸ੍ਰੀ ਗੁਰੂ ਜੀ ਬਹਿਸ ਕਰਨ ਜੋਗੀਆ ਨਾਲ ਗਏ ਸਨ’... ਭਾਈ ਗੁਰਦਾਸ ਜੀ ਦਸਦੇ ਹਨ ਕਿ ‘ਗੋਸਟ ਕਰਨ ਗੁਰੂ ਜੀ ਸਿਧ ਮੰਡਲੀ ਵਿਚ ਨਹੀਂ ਗਏ, ਪਰ ਸਿਧ ਗੁਰੂ ਜੀ ਦੇ ਦੀਵਾਨ ਵਿਚ ਆਏ... ‘ਸਿਧ ਸਭਾ ਕਰਿ ਆਸਣਿ ਬੈਠੇ’। ਕਿ ਸਿਧ ਸਭਾ ਵਿਚ ਆਸਣ ਕਰਕੇ (ਲਾ ਕੇ) ਬੈਠੇ, ਅਰਥਾਤ ਉਹ ਬਾਹਰੋਂ ਆਏ ਸਨ॥

Bhāi Gurdās ji was a seminal Gursikh, writer, poet, and outstanding gurmukh during the time of the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth *patsbāhīs* [Sikh Gurus]. What is written regarding this period [by Bhāi Gurdās] is an earlier representation than this *pothī* [the purātan janamsakhi]. For this reason, their [Bhāi Gurdās'] writings are given so that the reader can be assisted by other support regarding the situation [during this period] from the older and more accurate [truthful] source... From this [*vār*] it can be known that ‘Siddh Gosti’ certainly happened at Acal Vatālā... although many Giānis forget this and state that ‘Sri Gurū jī went to meet the jogis for a debate’... Bhāi Gurdās says that ‘Guru jī did not seek out the Siddhās for a discourse, instead the Siddhās came to Gurujī’s *divān*... ‘*siddh sabhā kar āsan baithe*,’ which means that Siddhās came, performed their yogic poses, and then sat down -or that they entered from elsewhere.

(Singh 1926, 189)

The note deals with the chronological sequence of the purātan source manuscript in which Siddh gosti occurs at Mount Sumer and Acal Vatālā before Nanak’s departure for Mecca.

In composing this note, BVS strives to make it clear that Nanak did not travel to the centre of the Nāth Yogīs at Acal Vatālā or the mythic Mount Sumer. Bhāi Gurdās’ *vār pehlī* is used as an older and therefore more accurate source written by an author known to have been resident in the court of several Sikh Gurus. Gurdās gives a reverse chronology; Nanak goes to Mecca first, visits the pīr of Multān on the return journey, and settles at Kartārpur all before having a discourse with the Siddhās. Bhāi Gurdās narrates that Nanak went to the annual festival at Acal Vatālā and, as BVS interprets, a group (*sabhā*) of Siddhās left their centre to meet Nanak where he sat. Vir Singh’s interpretation puts Nanak above the Siddhās as Gurdās intended. The stakes of this movement are not inconsequential but represent a balance of power and spiritual hierarchy.

This paratextual material focuses on the “authentic” chronological and event-based aspects of Nanak’s life to display for readers what he means in his prefatory invocation to read the Janamsakhi with scepticism. In correcting both the chronology and the hierarchical relationship between Siddh and Guru Nanak, BVS moves beyond the Janamsakhi manuscripts he is using to engage the readers autodialogic process and direct it towards a “more authentic” source from which subjectivity can arise.

The “*” is used throughout Sākhī 51 to notify readers of authentic and extra-scriptural writings. Poetic verses are used in all the sequences whenever interlocution occurs; Nanak’s response is always in the form of poetic couplets. There are other instances of the “*” use for defining the lexicography, such as the term Hajji, or providing some conjectural comments about characters like Pīr Patalie – who BVS speculates may be the Pīr of Patna based upon a corruption of “Patanīe.” Vīr Singh occasionally gives historical contextualization under this mark as well. Thus, Pīr Patalie may be one of the early successors to Baba Farid, Sheikh Ibrahim. BVS does not give any consideration as to why other appearances where Sheikh Ibrahim dialogues with Nanak do not use this title or why in the Mecca sequence a cryptic reference to Sheikh Ibrahim would have been required (Singh 1926, 182 and 189).

Given the loss of the original manuscript, the paratextual material indicates that out of the seven poetic replies by Nanak in the sakhi, BVS was able to use the SGGS to reinsert five corrected and authenticate verses. By peeling the layers of paratextual commentary back, one can see a greater modification of the verses in the critical edition. Only two of the verses fit the historicist model of biography that BVS is using – where Nanak directly recites only his own verses as they are strictly found within the authoritative version of SGGS. Based on BVS’s model, there are in fact five “incorrect” representations of Nanak’s poetic utterances and only two correct expressions. BVS’s editorial protocol suggests that by philosophical transgression and idealized typology, the discerning reader would gravitate towards subjective identity formation.

The first verse that is “corrected” using the SGGS is in response to Rukndīn following the Ka ‘bah event when Nanak is asked to give his name. The second extra-scriptural verse occurs at the beginning of the *gosti* with Rukndīn, where he asks if anything can be produced by those who use the 30-letter writing system, the Perso-Arabic letters. BVS elected to use the “†” notation mark and removes this verse entirely. The note states that an extra-scriptural *siharfī* poem is given by Nanak here but can be read in the appendices. He goes on to state that the poem is inauthentic because it is not written in Persian or Arabic, the languages in which the *gosti* surely occurred. The appendix does not, however, give the entire *siharfī*, or 30-letter acrostic poem, but ends after the fourth letter. Comparing the paratextual notes reveals that two of the references from the SGGS are not by Nanak but by Kabīr and the fifth Sikh Guru, Arjan (Singh 1926, 183 and 189). Reducing these issues to simply an authorial error in judgment also helps maintain focus on the reader locating authentic historical moments.

By comparing the verses from the manuscript with the SGGS (M. Singh 1964) directly, another extra-scriptural verse reveals itself in Rukndīn’s second question to Nanak. The *valaitvālī* manuscript folios 203a & 204a give an extra-scriptural verse which has the phrase “*talbā pausan ā kīā*” that is

used by Nanak in *rāg rāmkalī*. The phrase here refers to those who enter the way of striving, yearning, or learning. *Talbā pausan* can refer to some of the practices advocated by the Sikh Gurus. Another verse by Nanak in *rāmkalī* from SGGS replaces the manuscript verses. It begins with an invocation to the mind to listen carefully to these teachings (*re manā sunīe sikh sahī*), offering a way to define the term “Sikh” without recourse to religious identity (Singh 1964, 953 *paurhi* 13).

BVS uses this phrase as the rationale behind omitting the entire extra-scriptural verse, replacing it with an authentic verse by Nanak from the SGGS. However, this sabd's meaning is completely different save for the phrase “*talbā pausan ā kīā*” (Singh 1964, 953–955). The invocation to the minds of Sikhs to listen to correct and authentic tradition (*re manā sunīe sikh sahī*) reaffirms some of the new sceptical reading practices being invoked by BVS and Gurmukh Singh in the critically edited *Janamsakhi*. Through the editing process, BVS historicizes the voice of Nanak and its scriptural presence as the editorial protocol against the evidence presented internally to the manuscripts where no such process appears to have exerted any metaphysical force on authorial decisions. This reconfiguring of the textual verses directs the rationalizing and comparative tendencies of modern readers to an idealization of Nanak and scripture imposed upon individual *sākhīs* to ensure a reproducible Sikh subjectivity. Historicizing the *sākhī*'s narrative logic precedes or helps create a historically affected mode of consciousness for the modern Sikh subject.

Tracing the process of this insertion reveals a different thread common to all the poetic references which act as a nonhistorical thread that connects them – all the poetic utterances found in “*Sākhī* 51” are in *rāg tilang* in the manuscript. Thus, BVS's incorporation of *rāg rāmkalī* marks a further interdiction into the structure and logos of the manuscript. *Rāg rām kalī* is a morning rag used to engage in questions about truth vis-à-vis a spiritual quest. *Tilang*, a *rāg* performed at night, is thought to have a reflective and calming flavour (*rasa*). This rag was used by the Sikh Gurus to engage in existential and ontological questions about human nature and aspects of human presence in creation. *Tilang*'s interdiction turns the reader towards existential categories like “Sikh” in *re manā sunīe sikh sahī*. A historicist interpretation is introduced to reroute reading practices towards subjective formation and rationalization through autodialogue with paratextual material. The “*” notations used by BVS help reveal how philology transgresses into a philosophical idealization based upon delimiting Sikh consciousness and identity.

Conclusion

I have argued that BVS's edited version of the *PJ* unwittingly enacts a philosophical transgression that changes the dialogic structure, emphasis, and narrative order of the *Janamsakhi* creating an autodialogic phenomenology

of reading that is conducive to self-becoming. The autodialogic process arose out of the colonial encounter between religious reformers and scholar-bureaucrats and helped ensure that readers think about authenticity, origin, and temporal events – as opposed to a focus on *Gurbānī* and *Gursikh* epistemology. The *PJ* allows a reproducible Sikh identity to be cultivated self-consciously by the reader using autodialogic phantastic images of a past. Ironically, this self-cultivated Sikh is not historically situated in empirically verifiable fact but is the emanation from a de-territorialized and temporally disjunct textual practice whose locus of identity formation can be perpetually re-enacted through reading that sakhi again. The critical edition reroutes the Janamsakhi's isness through the circuitry of historical narrative time in two ways: first, the introduction of modern structural paradigms and, second, by correcting instances of *bānī* in his *PJ*. We begin to see how modernist Sikh notions of the past, reason, and reading practices predispose conceptualization of “Sikhism” to foundationalist modes of argumentation – the search for the origin of Sikh identity produces a philosophical transgression that leads to the forgetting of the Janamsakhi's links to the Sikh tradition's precolonial modes of thought.

These editorial innovations facilitate introspection by individual Sikhs seeking to authenticate the purpose of life through religious interiority and mystic ideas. Thus, Sikhism can function seemingly unaltered from its origin while remaining squarely within the dominant secular paradigm. However, this familiarity belies precolonial and continuing textual practices that pervade the text and try to undo the knot of the objectal “I,” or *haumai*. I suggest BVS's philosophical transgression reflects lived conflicts between religious self-identification and pragmatic needs of the time. However, the earlier forms of embodied textuality native to early Sikh thought based on SGG's epistemology are obscured and eventually forgotten due to the need to criticize the Janamsakhi so as to produce a modern self-conscious religiously based colonized Sikh identity. Further research into the diverse modes of intellection, and transformation of consciousness, that helped traditionally trained Sikh exponents create the early Sikh archive needs further consideration. Pursuing this avenue of research enables new perspectives on Janamsakhi literature and revivifying sovereign Sikh epistemology.

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11 Transcendence and the Modern Sikh Subject

Analyzing Bhai Vir Singh's Theology

Arvind-Pal S. Mandair

Preamble

How does one approach Bhai Vir Singh's (BVS) writings today? How not to approach him? Who exactly was BVS? The father of modern Punjabi literature? A mystic? A poet? A fictional historian? Sikh theologian and ethicist? Modernist or traditionalist? A pamphleteer of the Singh Sabha movement? Or was he all these things together? These are just some of the questions that have continued to be asked since the 100th birth anniversary of BVS in 1972, not only by critically minded scholars in Sikh and Punjabi literature but also by the large number of more devotionally inclined followers whose projection of BVS as a saint\mystic prevented a more "objective appreciation" of his oeuvre.

My aim in this chapter is far more modest, in as much as I leave these larger assessments to the editors and contributors of this volume. Instead, I'd like to focus on reassessing one particular aspect of BVS's work, namely, his role as a philosophical theologian in reconfiguring the Sikh understanding of *gurmata* (or central teaching of the Sikh Gurus) in alignment with modern Western thought, which he achieved by ontologically reconstituting (or systematizing) of the concept of God. The questions I ask in my reading of BVS are relatively simple. Bearing in mind that BVS was born into a family of traditional exegetes and memory-bearers of Sikh tradition, what was the motivation for reinterpreting Sikh concepts? How exactly did he achieve this? Is it possible to analyze the key moves in this reconstitution? What are the broader implications—intellectual, philosophical, theological, ethical, psychological—of this reinterpretation? Why does it matter today?

Before getting into the analysis of BVS's exegesis of *gurbani* however, I'd like to note here that in regard to his reinterpretation, reconfiguration, and reconstitution of Sikh concepts, the suggestion that BVS changed something in regard to the understanding of Sikh concepts is not entirely novel. Prominent scholars of Sikh and Punjabi literature suggested something similar almost half a century ago. The philosopher and literary critic J.S. Ahluwalia, for example, noted that BVS was the "last transcendentalist in

the history of Punjabi literature” (Ahluwalia 121) and that his transcendental mysticism appears to have been responsible for the “mutually contradictory tendencies” in his writings. If the ultimate aim of his poetry was to induce a mystical state of “transcendental ecstasy” (123), the immediate effect of this desire for ecstasy was to “blunt the original anti-feudal spirit of Sikhism” (122). For Ahluwalia, by doing this BVS “deviates from the Sikh ethos substantially” (121) and this deviation can be seen not only in his emphasis on withdrawal from “worldly, social reality” but in the translation of this “withdrawal into the concept of an ideal life....[as] that of living without physical toil” (129). Ahluwalia goes so far as to note that BVS’s inclination toward “ecstatic transcendental mysticism” as the end of Sikh spirituality owes to the “latent contradictions of his sensibility and class character.” Although he doesn’t elaborate on this at length, it is without doubt a reference to BVS’s *khatri* caste-class inheritance and the inherited influence of Vedantic idealism which “deviated substantially from the non-Vedantic Sikh mode of thought” (165).

These are fairly strong assertions by Ahluwalia, who himself was a foremost proponent of the concept of Sikh sovereignty and an accomplished Sikh philosopher and academic.¹ In fact, in the same series of chapters, Ahluwalia makes an even stronger claim suggesting that BVS belonged to the wing of the Singh Sabha movement (of which he was also the chief ideologue) that, certainly before the 1930s, remained loyal to the British Empire: “In the same spirit [as the CKD] BVS exalts the Sikhs to remain loyal to the British Raj in the preface to his novel *Bijai Singh*” (128). The tenor of Ahluwalia’s statement is supported by other noted literary critics of the period such as Attar Singh who also notes the same kind of transcendentalism resulting in the “Neo—moralistic creed” with “almost complete denial of the body” and political involvement in the world (Attar Singh 1988). This being said, however, my intention in this chapter is not to argue for or against either Ahluwalia’s or Attar Singh’s readings. Not least because their analyses are based on readings of BVS’s poetry and fictional works, whereas my own focus is on a rather different literature, namely, the scriptural commentaries composed by BVS such as *Santhya Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, regarded as one of the most authoritative of all Singh Sabha commentaries on scripture. The importance of this commentary is that it provides a glimpse into how modern Sikh thought (i) operates differently from earlier traditions of exegesis, (ii) lays the foundation for the emergence of modern Sikh theology, and (iii) helps to underwrite the future master narrative of Sikhism as a “world religion.” All of this I argue is dependent on the way that BVS is able to reconstitute the *form* of exegesis closer to Western ontological proofs for the existence of God. My argument, however, does not rest with simply explaining these analytical moves, for it appears that the kind of transcendental mysticism emerging from BVS’s exegesis was not simply intended as an exercise in abstract systematic theology. Similar to the writers of Western ontological proofs for God’s existence, his intention was to establish a modern

Sikh subject. Indeed, as Ahluwalia astutely notes, BVS's "motivational force springs from the psychological plane" (124). Or to be more specific, it comes from the creative upheavals within his own psyche which he wished to replicate in the wider Sikh domain.

I begin by setting BVS's commentary in the context of broader Singh Sabha revivalist activity and the response to the perceived triple threat from (i) secular Western Orientalism in the form of Trumpp's first official translation of the *Adi Granth*, (ii) Christian missionary activity, and (iii) the awakening of Vedic orthodoxy in the form of an ultra-conservative Hindu political theological consciousness which spread quickly across the Indian subcontinent. This political theological consciousness was championed by proponents of the Sanatana Dharma Sabhas and the Arya Samaj, a movement that stigmatized and attempted to absorb Sikh thought and practice back into the fold of Vedic orthodoxy. This chapter then provides a close reading of the analytical moves by BVS in his *Santhya*. In the final section, I conclude this chapter by returning to Attar Singh's assessment of BVS, who argues even more clearly than Ahluwalia that BVS's poetic form and interpretive process were able to "effectively impinge upon the consciousness of those to whom it was addressed" (Attar Singh 1988: 67).

Reconstituting *Gurmat* in terms of theological transcendence

It is now generally accepted that neocolonial reform movements such as the Singh Sabha played a crucial role in transforming and eventually monopolizing the interpretation of Sikh tradition. The representation of modern Sikhism as an ethical monotheism owes much to the political activism and scholarly output of members of the Singh Sabha movement (Barrier 1970; McLeod 1989; 1990; Oberoi 1994). However, as a recent editorial introduction rightly points out, the scholarly work of the Singh Sabha is also

[R]esponsible for a major obstacle to our understanding of the Sikh tradition, one which is rendered all the more serious by virtue of its being difficult to recognize. The obstacle derives from the remarkable measure of intellectual success achieved by a small group of Singh Sabha writers in formulating a distinctive interpretation of the Sikh tradition and in promulgating it as the only acceptable version. [M]en like Dit Singh, Vir Singh, Teja Singh, Kahn Singh of Nabha were so successful in their attempt to reformulate the Sikh tradition that their general interpretation of the tradition acquired the status of implicit truth. That status it continues to hold to the present day.

(O'Connell et al. 1990)

What exactly is this "major obstacle" in understanding Sikh tradition, and why is it so "difficult to recognize?" Although it has not been considered in

this way, some of the main consequences arising from the transformation of Sikh tradition during the colonial period—the redefinition of Sikh identity (McLeod 1989), the construction of religious boundaries (Oberoi 1994), the reinvention of Sikh martyrologies (Fenech 2000), the representation of Sikhism as a “world religion” (Dusenbury 1999), and not least the production of new commentaries on Sikh scripture (McLeod 1984; P. Singh 2000)—are intrinsically linked to the formulation of a *systematic concept of God* and a redefining of the meaning of *gurmat* (lit. the teaching of the Guru) as “Sikh theology.” In many ways, the commentaries provide the core of the response by reformist Sikhs to the new regime of colonial translation brought into operation by the publication and endorsement of Ernest Trumpp’s translation of the *Adi Granth*. The response to Trumpp from reformist Sikhs, which came almost 50 years later, appeared in the form of short treatises on Sikh history and longer more systematic works of scriptural commentary which were of a broadly theological nature (McLeod 1990). One of the more far-reaching effects of these commentaries is that they helped to crystallize a new and distinctive way of representing the central teaching of the *Adi Granth*. The central teachings (*gurmat*) came to be projected from a standpoint of a systematic concept of God or Ultimate Reality, based on which *gurmat*, theology, and tradition come to be seen as synonymous. The idea that *gurmat* (=theology = tradition) can be represented in terms of a proper concept of God came to exert a hegemonic influence on the modern Sikh imaginary.

Surprisingly, however, the suggestion that the prevailing concept of God in modern Sikhism evolved under historical circumstances goes against the grain of conventional wisdom about Sikhism—both traditionalist and historical²—which assume that the commentaries of the Singh Sabha simply extracted and reproduced a theological hermeneutic that is intrinsic to the teachings of Guru Nanak as found in the central Sikh scripture the *Adi Granth*. The familiar narrative of traditionalist scholarship, for example, assumes that at the heart of Sikhism lies the mystical experience of Guru Nanak, an experience that is articulated through his own poetic compositions (*gurbani*) and his teaching (*gurmat*). The nature of this teaching conforms to a revealed theology grounded in the concept of a transcendent and immanent God. By way of comparison, the prevailing perspective in historical (and by self-definition “critical”) Sikh studies as articulated by its most distinguished exponent, W. H. McLeod, considers Guru Nanak to be part and parcel of the devotional tradition of North India and specifically within the Sant lineage. The basis of Sant religiosity is *nirgun bhakti* or devotion to the Name of an ineffable transcendent being. Speculating elsewhere on the possibility of a Sikh theology for modern times, McLeod argues that although strictly speaking theology is a Western discipline, Sikh tradition “as it has evolved” under the Singh Sabha is rendered “eminently suitable to a theological treatment.” The idea of a Sikh theology can therefore be justified because theology encompasses both the “natural theology

of Nanak's *bani*" and the evolution of a Sikh exegetical tradition in the hands of the Singh Sabha. Moreover, "theology is a suitable category in the sense that there is no essential distortion of scriptural meaning" (McLeod 1990). Hence, the word *gurmat* as used by the Singh Sabha is a suitably pragmatic translation for "theology." The only requirement today would be to modernize its mode of reception. Because this perspective is likely to be echoed by traditionalist scholars, there appears to be a consensus on one of the central points about the Sikh religion.

This chapter argues for a degree of vigilance to be exercised at precisely the point where there appears to be a fundamental link between these two otherwise divergent schools of thought. The link consists in a certain understanding of transcendence that refers simultaneously to the idea of a transcendent being and a method of inquiry. In this sense, both narratives adhere to a preconceived notion of transcendence as universal or transcultural, which enables it to be used both as a theological and as an anthropological tool in the conceptualization of religion. Though rarely understood, however, both "critical" and "traditionalist" narratives deploy two very different models of transcendence: epistemological transcendence and theological transcendence (Heidegger 1992). Despite differences, these two models have come to be confused and entangled with each other, resulting in a dialectical illusion which pretends to the transcendence of itself. This illusion has been most pervasive in movements such as phenomenology, systematic theology, and through them the comparative study of religion (Land 1991). The result broadly speaking has been a confusion between the conditions of possibility and their products. Such confusions commonly confuse the transcendental with the transcendent performing a gesture that can be described as metaphysics or ontotheology (Caputo 2002). Following Heidegger's pregnant suggestion that the basic constitution of metaphysics is ontotheological (Heidegger 1969)—which means that far from being a term that can be applied without prejudice to all cultures, metaphysics is rooted in a specific religio-cultural tradition whose contours reveal themselves through the combination and continuity of the Greek (*onto*), Christian-scholastic (*-theo*), and secular-humanist (*-logical*) traditions—it is possible to uncover a somewhat uneasy intersection between postcolonial theory and recent continental philosophy of religion. This intersection questions the belief in unhindered translatability and/or universality of themes such as religion/God/theology into non-Western contexts. For cultural traditions such as the Indic which have no exact referents for religion/God/theology, one cannot simply make assumptions such as "Sikh theology" unless one also assumes the existence of a transcendental subject—a subject who invokes the desire for "Sikh theology" and one that is necessary for there to be any historical, that is, epistemological classification of Sikh theology as a phenomenon. It follows that the unhindered translatability or universality of terms such as religion/God/theology into non-Western contexts—specifically in this case for Indic traditions which have no

exact referents for these terms—cannot simply be assumed. It is precisely through assumptions such as “Sikh theology,” or a subject who naturally corresponds to the desire for “Sikh theology,” that a metaphysical violence can be discerned at the heart of the hermeneutic that reconstitutes *gurmat* as a theological transcendence proper to the Sikh tradition. The term “violence” is appropriate here because the consensus over the existence of Sikh theology rests, it will be argued, on a failure to recognize a metaphysics that disguises the processes of change and transformation as the *continuity* of Sikh tradition. Violence, in other words, refers to the erasure of time in the reconstitution of *gurmat*.

From a postcolonial perspective, it is more instructive to treat invocations of “Sikh theology” as a “performative utterance.” Adapted from J. L. Austin’s speech–act theory, the idea of “performative utterance” signifies a certain enunciation that may not necessarily have found articulation prior to the event of colonial translation but which comes to realization after the imposition (and acceptance) of a certain regime of translation: in this case the publication of Ernest Trumpp’s “official” translation of the *Adi Granth* in 1877 (Trumpp 1989). Though rarely acknowledged, this event had far-reaching consequences for the emergence of modern Sikhism’s religious ideology insofar as it helped to lay the conceptual groundwork for the reconstitution of *gurmat* (the Gurus’ teachings) as “Sikh theology.”

The theoretical strategy behind Trumpp’s translation is contained in a prefatory chapter entitled “Sketch of the Religion of the Sikhs.” Despite its brevity, this document exerted a profound impact on the minds of modern Sikh reformists. It would not be far from the truth to suggest that the vector informing the Sikhs’ rejection of Trumpp’s work, and subsequently their adoption of the conceptual medium of “theology” as the proper framework for representing the Gurus’ teachings, is largely a *response* to Trumpp.

Trumpp’s basic thesis was that although the “chief point in Nanak’s doctrine” was the “unity of the Supreme Being,” there were no reasonable grounds for specifically differentiating the notion of God in the *Adi Granth* from orthodox Hindu philosophy. Clearly influenced by the Brahminical learnings of his Nirmala collaborators, Trumpp duly translated the first line of the *Adi Granth* by missing out the numeral “1,” thereby rendering the opening syllable (*ik oankar*) as *om*.³ Given that philosophers of Vedanta had long expounded the meaning of *om* in terms of the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva), for Indologists and missionaries the word *om* represented Hindu pantheism; it was evidence of the Hindu mind’s inability to transcend multiplicity. Trumpp therefore regarded the presence of the numeral “1” at the beginning of the *Adi Granth* as superfluous, an empty gesture on Guru Nanak’s part since there was no conceptual correspondence between this “1” and the broader content of Sikh scripture. The numeral “1” could only imply one thing: transcendence of multiplicity and

conceptual coherence which, for Trumpp, was absent in the hymns of Guru Nanak. Once a lack of theological transcendence was established, it was but a short step to designate the teachings of Nanak as akin to either Hindu pantheism or Buddhist atheism.

Trumpp's work not only threatened to displace the image of Sikhism in the minds of colonial administrators well below that of other Indic religions; it also suggested that early European accounts of Sikhs as a separate monotheistic or deistic religion within the Indic context were largely mistaken. According to Trumpp's evidence, the pantheistic nature of Sikhism could be found within Guru Nanak's own hymns which fundamentally *lacked* an adequate concept of God and consequently an adequate notion of the self. More important than the mere distinction between the categories monotheism and pantheism—what is in effect the *condition* for the validity of such categories—was that Trumpp managed to displace the conceptual framework for any future discourse about Sikh scripture into the domain of ontotheology, that is, toward a field of translation in which all statements and propositions about the Sikh religion were automatically routed through the question concerning the nature of God's existence. Thus, the task for the Singh Sabha scholars was to disprove the reading of *gurmāt* as pantheism and therefore the signification of *lack* that pantheism implied.

In contradistinction to the view that Singh Sabha ideologues simply retrieved Guru Nanak's original intentions and seamlessly relocated them into a modern idiom (implying thereby the propriety of theological transcendence to the *Adi Granth*), I propose to read the emergence of Sikh theology in terms of a struggle to overcome the signification of lack. In this reading, the notion of lack becomes a critical hinge for any *post-colonial* reading of Sikh scripture insofar as it points to a fundamental resistance within the teachings of the *Adi Granth*—and therefore within any conceptualization of *gurmāt*—to what is known as metaphysics in Western philosophy and religion. Inevitably, such resistance also points to one of the more important though unresolved tensions in modern (neonationalist) representations of Sikh religiosity, namely, that *modern* Sikhism could only have come into being by repressing what is essentially nonmodern. The nonmodern refers to that which is incommensurable with the demands of modern consciousness such as contradictory and paradoxical notions of nonduality, identity, and the self—modes of subjectivity that do not conform to the ego-cogito of the broadly Cartesian type.

Some important clues about this resistance can be gleaned by comparing the meanings of nonduality, self, and identity as we find it in the hymns of the *Adi Granth* with the meanings that come to be delineated in the commentaries. Consider, for example, the following verses from the hymn *Siddh Gost* which depicts a debate between the Siddhas (expert practitioners of Yoga belonging to the Gorakhnath sect) and Guru Nanak. Here, we find Nanak evoking themes such as nonduality, self/ego/identity, and

freedom but at the same time avoiding a direct metaphysical response to questions posed by the Siddhas⁴:

Siddhas

What's the origin of the self? Where does it go? Where does it remain when merged? The teacher who can explain this mystery has indeed effaced all trace of desire.

How can one love a reality that has no form or trace?

Of itself the Absolute is the knower and the doer. How do you explain this, Nanak? (22)

Nanak

Originating from nature's order, one returns to this order, remaining always indistinct.

Through the guru's instruction one practices truth to gain a measure of divine form.

As for the beginning, one can only speak in terms of wonder, for the One was absorbed in void.

Think of the ear rings as the uncontrived nature of the guru's wisdom: that all existence is real.

By means of the guru's word one spontaneously attains the limitless state and merges into it.

O Nanak, one who works and inquires genuinely will not take another path.

Wondrous is the divine way. This truth is known only to those who walk in its way.

Consider him a yogi who becomes detached by effacing self-love and enshrining truth within. (23)

As pure form arises from infinite multiplicity, so existence becomes non-existence.

Through inner wisdom imparted by the guru one becomes attuned to the Name.

The ego's sense of difference is removed by recognizing the One truly as One.

He alone is a yogi who understands the guru's teaching and lets his lotus-mind bloom within.

Dying to the self everything becomes clear and one finds the source of all compassion.

O Nanak, by realizing the self's connectedness to all beings, honour is attained. (24)

The *gurmukh*'s self arises from truthful existence, then merges into its source, becoming identical with the One.

The self-centered beings come into this world yet find no place of rest. Attached to a sense of otherness their coming and going continues.

Blessed by the guru's instruction one learns self-discrimination and this ceaseless wandering ends.

Man's congenital sickness is attachment to the other through which one forgets the Name's real taste.

He alone is aware who is becomes aware without self-effort. Through the guru's Word he is liberated.

Nanak, the mortal who effaces duality by stilling the ego, Swims and helps others to swim across. (25)

In verses such as these, the tenor of which is repeated throughout the *Adi Granth*, the nonduality of the Absolute is conceptually inseparable from the notion of freedom as found in the classic Indic theme of the polarity of fusion and separation. In conformity to broadly Indic patterns, knowledge of this Absolute is grounded in a state of existence that has realized this nonduality by relinquishing the individuality of the ego and merging itself into the Other. In this state of being, one instinctively resists representation and conceptualization in terms of subject-object duality. Such a realized individual (*gurmukh*) no longer represents the Absolute to himself because the distinction between self and other, I and not-I, disappears into a knowing that knows without immediately splitting into subject and object. Though caricatured on the one hand as annihilation, dissolution, or depersonalization, and on the other hand as an impractical ideal, the figure of the *gurmukh* and the kind of freedom associated with it are better seen as an intensely creative form of existence through which the world is perceived not as something outside of ourselves, to be recognized in detail, adapted, complied with, and fitted into our idiosyncratic inner world but rather as an infinite succession of creative acts. The resistance posed by such meaning reveals what could be termed as the "middle ground" of Sikh religiosity. This is a ground which, in the absence of a certain metaphysical violence refuses a systematic *concept* of God, indeed, refuses the dominant form of conceptualization as it is understood in the Western philosophical traditions. Yet, it would be a mistake to think of this middle ground as some kind "original" Sikhism historically prior to colonialism and the nationalization of Sikh traditions. While the term "original" remains connected to some kind of authorial intention or psychological state that can be retrieved from a standpoint of present self-consciousness, or perhaps a form of Sikh religiosity that was historically displaced, the term "middle ground" points to idioms, practices, forms, and strata of experience that are different from but also broadly continuous with those of the wider North Indian devotional traditions. One could cite, for example, practices such as *kirtan* and *simran*, or themes such as *raga* and *rasa* which evoke feeling and mood, or again themes relating to personal time and destiny such as *mukti*, *karma*, and *samskaras*. Despite the temptation to treat them as exotic or mystical, these themes comprise what Michel de Certeau termed as the "practice of everyday life" in Sikh traditions. Yet with the emergence of a rationalized idiom characteristic of modern monotheistic Sikhism with its demand for uniqueness and clearly defined religious and cultural boundaries, the *articulation* of these nonmodern modes of thinking and experience

has undergone, indeed continue to undergo, a certain repression. For the purpose of this chapter, the term “middle ground”—insofar as it refers simultaneously to a nonduality and subjectivity that is nonrepresentational, nonconceptual, that cannot be theorized in terms of a subject that knows itself as an object nor reduced to the cognitive or the ethical—will provide a means for demonstrating continuities and transformations in the emergence of a “Sikh theology.”

Not surprisingly from the Western colonial perspective of translators such as Trumpp, this perspective on nonduality that I term as the “middle ground” came to be projected as a *lack* of a proper concept of God, a *lack* of ethical standpoint, and a *lack* of freedom in the religion of the Sikhs. In the commentaries, one finds a treatment of nonduality that is responding to these accusations of lack, and, insofar, begins to distance itself from the middle ground of the Adi Granth. Perhaps the best examples of this are the commentaries on the opening line of the Adi Granth which will be closely analyzed in the following section of this chapter. This opening line of the Adi Granth is better known as the *mul mantar* or the root mantra of Sikhism. For Sikhs, the *mul mantar* serves as the credal statement that expounds the central attributes of God:

[I]k oankar, satnam, karta purukh, nirbhau, nirvair, akal murat, ajuni, saibhang, gurparsad

One God Exists, Truth by Name, Creative Power, Without Fear, Without Enmity, Timeless Form, Unborn, Self-Existent, By the Guru's grace.⁵

In an effort to satisfy the perceived “lack” of an adequate conceptualization of God, Singh Sabha scholars invested a disproportionate effort to enunciate a precise and consistent meaning for the twelve or so words of the *mul mantar* since its meaning would reflect the meaning of the Adi Granth text as a whole. In what follows, I undertake a deconstructive⁶ reading of the way in which *gurmat* (lit. teaching/instruction of the guru) is constituted as theology, that is, as a system of knowledge about God, a process that is linked to the work of imagining God's existence in a particular way. To illustrate how this new imagining is produced, it will be necessary to pay close attention to the hermeneutic strategies deployed by the various Singh Sabha scholars,⁷ in particular their complex interweavings of time and ontology. Of the main commentaries, the commentary on the *mul mantar* by BVS is by far the longest, running into some 36 pages of dense exegesis. Unlike all other preceding commentaries in the Sikh tradition BVS's text reads unmistakably like a systematic philosophical argument for the existence of God—indeed a redefining of God's attributes “according to the guru's own instruction.” My analysis will therefore focus mainly on BVS's text and, for reasons that will become clear, on three words in the

mul mantra: *ik oankar* (One God Exists), *satnam* (Truth by Name), and *akal murat* (Timeless Form). In the third part of this chapter, I conclude by arguing that the Sikh reformist mode of thought, far from restating an original Sikh monotheism, actually makes a shift from previous Indic patterns of nonduality by importing a version of the ontological proof for God's existence.

Reading the Singh Sabha's exegesis on the nondual one

God's paradoxical unity

A short and rather innocuous looking footnote to the *mul mantra* by Teja Singh in his principal commentary, the *Shabadarth Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, summarizes the conceptual drive behind the reformists' exegetical project:

[E]h vartik rachna sikhi da 'mul mantra' hai. Arthat is vich oh bunyadi gallan dassian hoian han jinai dharm de neman di nih rakhi gai hai. Eh nih vahiguru di hasti di hai, us da sarup inhan lafzan vich ditta hoia hai.

This verse composition is the '*mul mantra*' of Sikhi(sm); that is to say, within it are expounded those basic things upon which the foundations of religious faith (*dharam de neman di nih*) have been built. This foundation is the being or existence of God (*hasti*), whose configuration (*sarup*) is given in these words...(of the *mul mantra*).

(Teja Singh 1996: 1)

In three short points, this statement outlines the circular hermeneutic of Singh Sabha theology: that scripture grounds the religious faith called Sikhism; that this ground is the existence of God; and that God's existence is configured or represented by the words of scripture. Yet, the circularity of the statement also reveals a fissure which prevents any intended closure. This fissure is the difference between the being of God *as God* and the being of God as he comes to be *configured* or imagined in the commentary (*sarup, hasti, hond*)—a configuration which, in turn, points beyond its portrayal in scripture toward a logic of self-retrieval from which it originates. It is to the strategies of self-retrieval—disguised as an effacement or interiorization of the self—that my reading will pay constant attention.

What is immediately noticeable about the commentaries on the meaning of the *mul mantra* and specifically the first syllable *ik oankar* is that they are rendered as a cleansing of authentic Sikh meaning by removing from it any association with the root mantra of Hinduism, namely the syllable *om*. Each of the Singh Sabha exegetes presents short summaries of the syllable *om* as it has been understood in the Sanatan dharma, that is in the Vedic and Puranic traditions, before contrasting it with the "true" Sikh interpretation which begins with the countering phrase: "But according to

Gurmat...” (*par gurmata vich...*). The Sikh reformists justify their opposition to Vedic meanings by making a fundamental distinction between the Vedic *om* and the Sikh *ik oankar*. The Sikh syllable is differentiated from the Hindu by the numeral 1 (*ik*) which, they argue, is evidence for the monotheistic nature of Sikhism, its emphasis on the oneness of God, whereas in Sanatan tradition, *om* symbolizes the pantheistic nature of the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

Paradoxically though, the efforts of Sikh reformist scholars to remove Hindu influence led them to construct a system which, though outwardly monotheistic, could not avoid denegatory references to the ancient Vedantic metaphysics.⁸ Consider, for example, the interpretations of Kahn Singh and Jodh Singh which happen to be virtually identical: “But according to *gurmata* the numeral 1 is placed before the word *om* in order to clarify that the creator is one” (Nabha 1981: 21).⁹ Here, the Hindu word *om* is the same as the Sikh word *oankar*, except for its qualification by the numeral 1. Similarly for Jodh Singh, the matter is relatively straightforward where the numeral 1 serves to emphasize the essential quality of the being of God as unity: “that Being which is one only” (J. Singh 1932: 1).¹⁰

BVS’s interpretation is more complex than either of the above. He comments at length on the separate components of the syllable *ik oankar*. According to BVS, the numeral 1 is not a quality that can be attributed to a being: “this ‘1’ has not been used as a numerical attribute/quality but as a denotative”¹¹ (BVS 1997: 2). The numeral “1” stands for “that which signifies his configuration, his name”¹² (BVS 1997: 2). By naming the essence of God’s being as oneness or unity (*ektav*), the numeral “1” is not the same as any other attribute. This “1” qualifies but is not itself qualifiable by any other quality except itself. By referring only to itself, “1” denotes absolute identity and unity, pure oneness: *ektav*. Ironically, though, in the very first line of his commentary, BVS is forced to speak about this ineffable “1”:

Oneness exists (the formless, who is in a state of indeterminate void)
ektav hai (nirankar, jo nantav vich)

There is existence (manifesting as form yet still oneness).

oankar (rup hoke phir ektav) hai.

(BVS 1997: 1)

In other words, BVS’s need to account for the coming-into-form as a transition from pure oneness or indeterminate void illustrates the aporia of any beginning. Namely, that the first act is an act of translation, the translation from formlessness to form, from void to existence. Yet, no sooner is the act of translation revealed than it must be denegated or foreclosed lest the movement of this translation be revealed as a movement of thought and therefore as an imperfection within this “One.” I borrow the terms denegation and foreclosure from the vocabulary of Lacanian psychoanalysis. They refer to a peculiar strategy of repression in which according to Lacan, “the

ego rejects [an] incompatible idea together with the affect and behaves as if the idea never occurred to the ego” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1974: 166–169). The affect in question here is an anxiety concerning the disclosure of time at the heart of God’s identity, his Oneness. The anxiety points to a potentially serious obstacle in any attempt to present a systematic theology and an ethically responsible subject. That is to say, a subject that is capable of successfully separating itself from the maternal (in this case “Hindu”) body. In BVS’s text, the work of denegation centers mainly around the polysemic nature of the word *nantav* which occurs at key moments in the explication of *ik oankar* and specifically in the work of delimiting the precise nature of the oneness (*ektav*). Derived from the root *nan* meaning nothing or negative, the term *nantav* refers to what is abstract, indeterminate, or devoid of form. At the same time, indeed later in the very same commentary, *nantav* will also carry the meanings of multiplicity, differentiation, and diversity within the created expanse.

For BVS

[T]his One which we speak of in periodic time as beyond the reach of mind or intelligence.... without form, without sign or mark... (also happens to be) that which we perceive as abstract or indeterminate,. [B]y further contemplating this aspect we perceive this aspect as diffused through all existent beings. What this means is that within His own oneness he always exists as one (*sada ik hai*).¹³

(BVS 1997: 2)

The word “always” indicates a refiguring of time that serves to suture any perceived difference between God’s oneness and existence that may be implied through the polysemic term *nantav*: “When there is but the One then (He) exists as one. When perceived as indeterminate then he exists as diffused, but though diffused, his existence is not eclipsed by non-existence. In the state of abstraction also he remains but one”¹⁴ (BVS 1997: 2).

Clearly, BVS’s anxiety is linked to the possibility of misperceiving God’s paradoxical oneness as a duality: there/not there; existent/nonexistent. Yet for BVS, the very suggestion that the “1” could signify non-existence is anathema, tantamount to an imperfect concept of God. Indeed only a few paragraphs later, we come across an even stronger disavowal of non-existence:

According to the instruction of the (10th) Guru the ground (*mul*) of this infinite (*anokha*) or abstract (*nantav*) or created (*sristi*), ‘1’, whatever we call it, is not a zero or void (*shun*). It is not non-existence or negation (*anhond ya manfiat nahin*), rather [its ground] is existence which is ‘1’ (*par hond hai jo ik hai*). The visible and invisible (*drishya andrishya*) are manifestations of this ‘one’ unmoved being (*‘iko’ thir hasti*).

(BVS 1997: 3)

To reinforce this, there follows a revealing footnote:

The meaning of '*shun*' is non-existence (*sun da artha 'anhond' hai*). But according to the teaching of the Guru '1' stands for 'true existence' ('*yatharth hasti*'). Nothingness or non-existence ('*shun matar ya anhond*') is not *gurmat* Sometimes, though, the idea of 'nothingness'

has been used in explanations of the existence of the Supreme Being (*sun pad kaiee vari paramatman di hasti de arthan vich aya hai*). Consider, for example, Shankara's saying:

'*ghambir dhiram nirvana sunyam/sansara saram nacha papa punyam*'. Compare this to the Guru's own saying: '*Ghat ghat shun ka janai bheoladi purakh niranjan deo*', [in which] *shun* does not refer to nothingness or non-existence (*oh anhond nahin*) but to the primal being (*adi purakh hai*) who manifests to us as configuration/form (*prakash sarup hai*). But here the meaning of *shun* is the Supreme Deity without sign or mark (*ithai shun da arth niranjan parmatman dev hai*)¹⁵ (BVS 1997: 3). The strategy of denegation is just as evident in the explication of the letter *oankar* which comprises the linguistic half of the symbol *ik oankar*. Thus we read

From antiquity (*om*) has been a symbol for the supreme being (*paramesvar*) **but in *gurmat*** (my emphasis) it is pronounced as *oankar*. It is the proper manifestation of the Supreme Being in which (his) Nirgun aspect and Sargun aspects are indiscriminately present and in which the dynamic and causal aspects are united.

In the Upanisads *om* is the basis of the Nirguna and Saguna aspects of Brahman. The Puranic writers split (the word *om*) into the letters *a u m* indicating the three-fold division of the Hindu pantheon. **But in *gurmat*** (my emphasis) there is no such division. *Om* is one letter and its meaning is Supreme Being. In its written form it conveys that Nirgun, who, becoming Sargun, yet remains one.

(BVS 1942)¹⁶

Despite efforts to the contrary, the central issue that arises in BVS's treatment of *ik oankar* is an unmistakable tension between desire and fact. On the one hand, the desire to know and therefore present God's identity as Absolute (as God exists in himself), an identity which cannot be represented except through number (*ek, ektav*) and negation (*nirgun*) which do not admit either attribute or relationality. On the other hand, the fact that in speaking about God duality and contradiction cannot be avoided. Indeed, the very movement toward speech about God must be represented as a difference between nonlanguage and language, nothingness and existence, unknowable and knowable, nontime and time. To acknowledge this difference, however, is to acknowledge that time and/as movement relate "essentially" to God's Absoluteness. Which means, paradoxically, that

God cannot be Absolute. It is therefore the contradictory logic of this idea—where difference grounds the very possibility for presenting the identity of God—that BVS and his fellow ideologues will be careful to avoid. Consequently, for them, number (“1”) and word (E) cannot be admitted as different or as representing a difference in God’s identity which is pure oneness (*ektav*). To admit such difference would inaugurate a translation from one mode (“1” = Nirgun = non-existence = unsayable) to another mode (oankar = Sargun = existence = the sayable). The very idea of a passage from one to another would introduce contingency, nihilism, indeed uncertainty, at the ground of existence. God’s identity might not then be Absolute. If so, could the entire message of the Sikh scripture (*gurmata*) have been unfolded on a nihilistic ground? Could impermanence be the proper ground of *gurmata*? A ground that in its unfolding, automatically undermines itself?

It is to avoid this dangerous possibility that BVS attempts to overcome the paradox at the heart of *ik oankar*. This is done by implementing a metaphysical assumption: that identity (*ektav*-oneness) is the condition for existence and conversely that existence is the condition for identity. The intrinsic bond between identity and existence ensures that the division between *Nirgun* and *Sargun* will have been overcome, through a classic deployment of the law of non-contradiction ($A = A$). Thus, *Nirgun*—normally translated as ineffable—comes to be *represented* by an identity—the identity of *Nirgun* and *Sargun*—which is logically prior to the difference between them. However, the very resource for this identification can only come from the definition of being itself. This move (where the possibility of *Nirgun* as void/non-existence is circumvented by assuming that the identity of *Nirgun* and *Sargun* grounds any difference between them) actually takes place in the commentary on *satnam*.

Divine stasis: refiguring time as eternity

Although the conventional translation for the compound word *satnam* is “True Name,” “Whose Name is Truth,” and so on, the commentaries begin by separating its two component terms *sat* (=being, existence) and *nam* (=Name) and then focus almost completely on *sat* so that the meaning of this term becomes determinative for *satnam*. The commentaries read as follows:

[T]hat (being) who remains of constant essence through the three modes of time

tin kal vich ik ras hon vala prsidh parbrahman. (Nabha 1981: 148–149)

[T]hat (being) which endures as existing forever

sada kaim nahin vala. (BVS 1942: 1) [W]hose name is the existent being

jis da nam hai hond vala. (S. Singh 1962: 46) [T]hat being/existence

who always remain *sada rahin vali oh hasti.*

(J. Singh 1932: 1)

That (being) which in time and eternity always remains stable/immutable" (*jo kal akal sada hi thir rahe*), or: "that oneness which being an immutable oneness, whose name alone exists; '*satya*' in other words is that self-conscious being that remains always stable/immutable

(*[oh ektav] sada thir [ektav hai, us da] nam hi hai [sat(I) arthat sada thir rahin vala chetan vajud]*).

(BVS 1997: 1)

Consider the word '*sat*' to be an exposition of '1'. The meaning of '1' is the one primal form which is one in every state of being, that is, which is immutable. Thus the meaning of word '*sat*' is that eternal (without break) form which remain always stable through the three states of time *is vich sat pad '1' da hi mano tika hai | '1' da arth hai—ek hai mul hasti jo har haal '1' hai, arthat jo sada abdal hai. So 'sat' pad da arth hai—trai kal abad rup jo sada thir hai.*

(BVS 1997: 10–11)

Two things immediately strike us about these commentaries. First, there is almost complete unanimity in the way that exegesis on the name is subsumed into questions of time and ontology. Second, and what follows from the first move, is the repeated use of words which stress a particular mode of time where continuity is valued above change: always; always fixed (*sada, sada thir, sada hi thir*); of singular essence (*ek ras*); always remaining fixed (*sada thir hai*); always existing without change (*sada abdal hai*); and eternal form (*abad rup*).

Contrary to appearances, these innocent looking phrases suggest that the exegesis on *sat* is more than simply an extended exposition of the nature of "1" as BVS himself seems to suggest. In fact, the exegesis on *sat* is used to justify a particular reading of transcendence—one where the very meaning of transcendence is redefined in relation to the refiguration of time as eternity. The implication of this move can be usefully explained by way of comparison to Platonic metaphysics. Such a comparison is revealing in view of the dominant Western metaphysical context in which all Indian thinkers of the time were operating.

Plato's key statement on this matter derives from his theory of naming as given in the *Cratylus* (1980). His theory of naming is concerned with two things: (1) the distinction between name and thing and (2) that which is named in the thing. As a measure of correctness, the name names the essential being within a thing. This essential being is the locus of the thing's meaning and by nature it must be fixed and of permanent duration. The very activity of naming, as the giving of a proper name, is therefore dependent on the assumption that what is named—essence as such—is "always such as it is." In turn, however, existence that is "always such as it is" depends on the distinction between two modes of temporality: the temporality of eternity as against the temporality of the present moment. This

distinction is valid because things come into existence (they are created) and pass away (have a finite lifetime). But that which is *essential* being and thus “always such as it is” cannot by definition come into existence or pass away. It is eternal. There is no prior and no after to the creative event. The Platonic essential being, the “always such as it is,” refers to the fact that what is named cannot be subject to change. Rather, what is named must be self-referring, always the same as itself, always identical. Hence the identity of the eternal: the eternally self-same as that which is always self-present.

BVS’s exegesis follows a very similar logic. For example, the distinction between time (*kal*) and not-time (*akal*) is effectively dissolved by grounding it in a being (*hasti, hond*) that is always stable (*sada hi thir*); stable because it admits of no change in essence. Which means that the point of difference between *kal* and *akal* (namely the not, or the negative) is sublated into a moment that is eternally self-present. Governing the relation between time (*kal*) and not-time (*akal*) is the identity of God as eternal self-presence which is indistinguishable from the notion of transcendence as absolute stability.

Ironically, though, the very possibility of division and duality raises further issues. If, as the commentary suggests, the truth of God’s identity lies in its eternal self-presence, how is this identity to be conveyed to those who read the commentary? How is this Being of God, when God is *being* God, to be presented? What is the link between that which is to be *presented* (Truth, identity of God) and the *form* of the presentation? Will any presentation of the truth/identity of the divine not itself admit of an invasion of time into the eternal moment? Will there not have been a movement or transference from one moment to another, the well-known fall into time and contingency? Or, if the eternal moment must be preserved, will any presentation not be a virtual presentation, no more than a reflection of what is always-as-it-is? Will this transferential movement not risk the danger of being *misperceived*, *misunderstood*—which from the beginning was the projected aim of these commentaries to avoid?

In short, the duality between the presentation and what is presented reveals one of the classic problems of religious knowledge: that there is an unavoidable discrepancy between the time of divinity (which the commentary seeks to present directly) and the time of the exegesis (which can at best re-present the divine). This discrepancy can only derive from a finite cognitive process, an act of imagining. How, then, to shift attention away from the operation of the imagination and by co-implication the identity of the thinker? This is the problem that BVS attempts to overcome (still within the exegesis of *sat*) by deploying a three-step strategy of self-effacement.

Step 1

BVS distinguishes two different kinds of cognition: the cognition of God as he is perceived by our empirical senses versus the kind of cognition of God as Absolute which is intrinsic to the nature of the word *sat* (being).

Sat is therefore a privileged word insofar as there is no change or variation in going from “1” to *sat*. *Sat* is not therefore based on a cognition of God but constitutes the ground for cognition as such. The assumption here is that God’s existence must first be guaranteed in order for there to be any possible cognition of God. This division of cognition is not entirely successful however. Problems arise once we move beyond the essential Word to a multiplicity of words and consequently to manifold ways of perceiving and describing God. The *mul mantra* itself is an example of this because the words *karta purukh*, *nirbhau*, *nirvair*, and so on can be regarded as different attributes of the same divine being (BVS 1997: 11).

Step 2

In order to overcome the multiplicity inherent in sensible perceptions, BVS argues that it is necessary to cultivate a special type of cognition that stabilizes multiplicity into a unity. This special cognition he attributes to the practice of meditative repetition (*jap*, *simran*) which transcends time and the sensuous imagination.¹⁷ Again, the kind of transcendence implied is one that immobilizes time, thus making it accord with the absolute immobilization of the eternal being of God. But as BVS realizes, the trace of the imagination cannot be effaced so easily. In order to argue for a shift toward repetition and remembrance, must he himself not rely on the very thinking he wishes to suppress? Does not the need to speak about God in terms of qualities and the fact that “we” can only perceive in multiple qualities (*gun/lacchan*) contaminate the divine with time?

Step 3

There follows a third move in which the notion of quality itself is further divided into two types: *sarup lacchan* or qualities that give an understanding of form that is direct, that is, perceived by one’s sense faculties, versus *tatsath lacchan* or qualities whose description of what is perceived transcends sense perception itself. *Tatsath lacchan* are privileged qualities that allow one to speak about God, or allow God to be configured, but which in the act of configuring, automatically negate or overcome any relation to the sensuous. For BVS, the *tatsath lacchan* par excellence is the word *karta* (Creator). *Karta* signifies a causation whose agency is not dependent on, or affected by, anything other than itself. Hence, *karta* cannot simply mean Creator but *unmoved mover*, *uncaused cause*. Now the transcendent (in the sense of quality-less) quality (*tatsath lacchan*) which enables us to cognize the form of the formless divine is called:

creator (*karta*).

hun nirankar de sarup nu lakhian vale tatsath lacchan kahinde hain ‘karta’.

(my emphasis)

Where this word '*karta*' is found in the *mul mantra* it gives the sense of the transcendent quality of the formless divine and operates as a causative *name* (*kirtam nam*).

[*jithe ih pad mul mantra vich pia hai uthai ih nirankar da tatsath lacchan hokai aya hai te kirtam nam hokai pia hai*].

(BVS 1997: 16)

The aim of these *tatsath lacchan* is clearly to neutralize any threat to the transcendence of the divine by trying to remove—through a process of dematerialization—any link to time and world, to the other, to the sensuous. By thus depriving any link to anything external, including being itself, what is ultimately effected is a pure self-positing, the self-movement of the form that is the subject. This pure subjectivity that defines the identity of God tries to efface every trace of the operation of imagining that might even hint at the existence of an *other* subject, that is, of alterity *per se*, since the presence of alterity would threaten the pure transcendence of this One.

Traces of idolatry in the image of the eternal

The commentaries on the phrase *akal murat* point to a convergence of the main anxieties outlined above. Briefly, the commentaries on *akal murat* read as follows:

([T]hat being) whose installation/representation is not subject to time
jis di sthapani samai de bhed karke nahi. (Singh 1931: 36) ([T]hat being) which is unaffected by time
us hasti pur samai da asar nahi.

(Singh 1932: 1)

[T]hat being whose form (*sarup*) is beyond time i.e. whose body (*sarir*) is not subject to destruction.

jis da sarup kal to pare hai bhau, jis da sarir nas rahit hai.

(Singh 1962: 46–47)

He is outside of time, yet being unaffected by time he is not non-existent, he exists as form/shape/image (i.e. He is in existence), meaning thereby that he has form (but) that form is not affected by time.

Oh akal = kal rahit hai, akal hokai oh anhond nabin, oh murat (= hond hai) arthat us da vajud ya sarup hai jo sarup kal to rahit hai.

(BVS 1997: 1, 27)

In view of the previous effort to prove that God, though existent, cannot be limited by form or figuration, the presence of the word *murat*—which conveys the meanings of image, shape, form, picture, painting, idol, body, likeness, and so on—might have presented a more direct challenge

to the reformists. Not least because one of the most important sociopolitical factors behind the divergence between reformists and traditionalists in colonial north India centered on the issue of the worship of images and idols (*murti puja*). As the Sikh reformist commentaries clearly admit, even within the *mul mantra* the word *murat* cannot easily escape a connection to time and world. But if the presentation of the formless divine “according to Gurmat” was to avoid any association with “Hindu” idolatry, it would be necessary for the reformists to show (1) that the word *murat* as used in Sikh scripture and being qualified by *akal* has a very different signification to the “Hindu,” and (2) that there is no contradiction or inconsistency in placing *akal* and *murat* together.

On the first count, BVS’s remarks are fairly self-assured. *Akal murat*, he argues, takes its final meaning solely from the *mul mantra*. It does not correspond to images painted on paper, cloth, or on walls (*kagaz ke kapraite kandan te chitarian murtian*) nor does it correspond to idols engraved in stone or cast in metal (*patharan te ukarian te dhatuan vich dalian murtian*) (BVS 1997: 27). According to the *mul mantra*, these are forbidden (*mul mantra de laksh hon to varjit ho gaian*). On the other count, regarding the consistency of meaning between *akal* and *murat*, there seems to be less certainty. The problem revolves around the semantic ambiguity of *kal* (time) which can have two different meanings depending on whether it is perceived subjectively or objectively. Thus, *kal* can be perceived subjectively as duration (*sama*) according to the three-fold division of time (*traivandan vich*) as beginning, middle and end or past, present, and future (*aad, madh, ant*) (BVS 1997: 27–28). This is time as it is ascertained by the self, or to be more faithful to BVS’s text, it is the sense of time as the self believes time to exist (*aap nu partit karounda hai*).¹⁸ Alternatively, time can be perceived objectively as when it shows itself to our self from the perspective of the end of time, that is, teleologically (*kal jo “ant” vich apna aap nu dikhalda hai ta arth maut ho janda hai*) (BVS 1997: 27–28).¹⁹ Thus if *kal* is taken objectively as “death,” then *akal* can take on the meanings of immortal, eternal, that which always remains as it is. Hence, *akal murat* must mean the eternal form, the form that transcends time, and because it transcends time is able to transcend form itself. But, as BVS explains, because the objective meaning of time as death/end is already contained within the subjective notion of time (“*kal*” *pad da arth “maut” arth “kal” pad de “sama” arth de antargat hai*), it is already part of a typically human understanding of time as a figure that is represented to a self who is always already present to itself. It follows, though, that the negation of this human time (*kal* as being-in-time) giving *akal* might imply a negation of the very mode of time whereby we conceive existence in general and the existence of all things. Which is to say that the logic of negation intrinsic to *akal* could be misunderstood as non-existence. However, it is, finally, to avoid this very possibility that BVS will stress that it is perfectly correct to write *akal murat* (“*akal*” *kabhkai murat pad nal likhna is vastai sahi hai*). By

being *akal*, which also implies the negation of subjective human time, God does not become nonexistent ("*akal*" *honai karke oh "an-hond" nahin ho janda*) (BVS 1997: 28).

Notwithstanding his efforts to find conceptual closure, BVS's argument reveals gaps at the very point where claims to extreme transcendence appear to be strongest. An obvious flaw is the reliance on the metaphor of the sun to conceptualize divine transcendence of sensuous form and quality. Yet, even this seemingly innocuous use of the metaphoric imagination is enough to preserve the effect of sensuous imagery while almost eliminating the threat posed by linking the sensuous to the divine. As one scholar (writing about a similar issue though in the very different context of early Christianity) has astutely noted, "In the all or nothing stakes implied by the extreme transcendence of the One, Even this tiniest residue [of the sensuous image] to which it inconspicuously but necessarily looks for support, is enough to compromise its avowed independence" (Gonclaves 1997: 90). What begins as an assured strategy of the concept's upward movement turns into a rather uncertain trade-off: good metaphors for bad idols, good concepts for bad images; and *akal murat* for *murati*, the external form for the perishable supplement. Yet, the valuation of the "good" image of eternity will have been generated within a subjective standpoint, produced by a self whose primary mode of relationality is auto-affection—the production of the self by the self. Given that auto-affection is ultimately premised on a failure, in the sense that it can only work by subjecting time to a metaphysical figure of eternity, so also for BVS, the eternal form (*akal murat*) can only be presented by thinking in and through form itself. It can only be imagined as a form in time: *sarir*, *sarup*, *hond*, and *hasti*.

Ironically, therefore, attempts by the Singh Sabha writers to overcome idolatry and idolatrous notions of God by means of the elevated concept have to admit the "tiniest residue" of idolatry into the process of cleansing *gurmat* (and therefore Sikhism) from any contamination by Hinduism. All along it seems, the Singh Sabha reformists were doing in their exegetical works precisely what they accused Hindus of doing in practice, which of course means that the project of constructing religious boundaries is compromised from the very outset. The question, however, is why, in a presentation where form simply replaces form, the trade-off could ever have been considered profitable? What is it that the reformists desired to gain? Or, inverting the question, what is it that the reformists thought they *lacked*?

Ontotheology and the eclipse of nonduality

To read the history of neocolonial reform movements such as the Singh Sabha as the history of a perceived lack is to question some of the foundational assumptions on which modern knowledge about Sikhism is based. Sikh scholars in the reformist tradition have unanimously disavowed the relevance or necessity of formal theological proofs to Sikhism, preferring to argue that

God and theology are naturally present in the Adi Granth. Writing within the conceptual framework set by Trumpp's translation, the Singh Sabha scholars needed to prove that Sikhism was not Hinduism by proving that the Sikh concept of God was not pantheistic but monotheistic. In short, they need to prove that God exists, that God's Name names this existence, and that the nature of this existence is an eternal identity, a static immutable One.

In view of its form and conceptual dynamic, however, it is difficult to deny that BVS's exegesis aspires to the status of a theological proof. Given that his commentary is structured not only by a dialectical chain of propositional statements about the nature of God but by a conceptual dynamic that moves from the Oneness of God (*ektav*), through the Being of God (*sat*), to the Eternal as the Identity of God (*akal*), the *form* and *logic* of BVS's presentation bear a striking resemblance to the scholastic doctrine of *scientia dei*, the importance of which lies in its inseparability from the ontological argument.²⁰ However, one would need to qualify the statement that BVS's exegesis on the nondual One *is* an ontological proof for the existence of God. Indeed, the appearance of such a proof is surprising for several reasons. First, although BVS received a secondary education in an Anglo-Vernacular mission school, there is no indication that BVS had detailed knowledge of Western philosophical theology and specifically not the history of the ontological proof. Second, prior to the Singh Sabha movement there is nothing akin to the ontological argument in the Sikh hermeneutic tradition.²¹ Third, in the broader Indic context, though there are venerable traditions of analysis and argumentation about the nature and reality of "God," all of these traditions differ from the ontological argument as it is known in the West, in regard to at least one crucial point which can be explained in the following way.

Ordinarily, the ontological argument in its various statements revolves around the definition of God as "that Being than which nothing greater can be thought... He who understands that God exists cannot think of Him as non-existent." In short God cannot be identified with nothingness. God is *not* nothing. Yet, the matter can never end there. For hiding behind this rendering of the ontological argument is the presupposition that nothing exists without reason, known in the Western philosophical and theological tradition as the principle of reason (Heidegger 1991: 26–28). The logic of this principle goes something like this. The reason why things exist rather than not exist resides in their cause. It follows that the first cause must also be the highest cause, a cause that towers above or transcends all others, namely, God. God's being thus transcends in the sense of being over-against and exceeding all conditioned beings. But although God is conceived as the highest being, such transcendence is still conceived from within the totality of all that exists. Which means that God, as with all other things that exist, remains subject to the principle of reason. God exists—indeed knowledge about God exists—only insofar as the principle of reason itself holds. Stated differently God exists only insofar as there

is first a self-grounding cognition, a self-knowing-itself, which is able to present itself in the mode of an ego-cogito. It belongs to this self-presenting subject, which first and foremost *knows* itself, that it certify itself continually, which means as an identity.

In his *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, Heidegger argues that the subjective basis of theological knowledge remains hidden due to a long standing confusion between two different ways of conceiving transcendence: epistemological and theological transcendence (Heidegger 1992: 161–162). Though seemingly opposed, the standpoint of epistemology is in fact taken for granted in all theological reasoning resulting in the confusion between the transcendent (the highest Being, first cause, God, and so on) and transcendence. The latter term is crucial since its signification of passing beyond limits can be understood in very different ways. There is, for example, the metaphysical sense of being absolutely unaffected by time, in which case the meanings of transcendent and transcendence are conjoined to give what is known as ontotheology. This notion of transcendence has been characteristic of the tradition of Western philosophical thinking that continually grounds itself on the field of self-consciousness, the *ego-cogito* of the post-Cartesian tradition, but is largely absent from Indian and other Oriental forms of thinking.

The appearance of the ontological argument in BVS's commentary clearly suggests that the enunciation of *gurmat* as Sikh theology, or as monotheism, requires a fundamental departure from precolonial Indic ontologies and a concomitant accession to the ontology of modernity. Between any departure from one ontology and accession to another lies the process of cultural translation that is experienced subjectively as a transformation. Insofar as any accession to modernity requires a break with the pre-modern (this being the founding gesture of modernity) the translation/transformation process can also be regarded—as Peter Van der Veer rightly suggests—as a “conversion to modernity.” The only difference here is that this process of translation/transformation was shown to occur seamlessly, without any hint of having been affected by anything foreign or external. To be more specific the transformation of *gurmat* to monotheism, a process which happens to be disguised as the natural movement of tradition, involves the accession of *gurmat* into the comparative schema of “world religions.”

As I argued elsewhere, however, the historical deployment of terms such as “monotheism” in context of Indic cultures must be viewed with caution (Mandair 2003). Far from being “natural” to the vocabulary of religions/theology, terms such as monotheism/pantheism/polytheism represent world-historical categories, which came to be invested with their present meanings in the context of political and intellectual encounter between West and non-West during the nineteenth century. Indeed, the rise of terms monotheism/pantheism/polytheism to world-historical status is inextricably linked to the advent of occidentalism and along with this, the idea of the nation.

An important consequence of this was the evolution of the comparative enterprise. Driven by a Kantian logic of “configuration”—a rivalrous mode of comparison organized by an assumed belief in the symmetry and equivalence between autonomous entities—the comparative enterprise can be seen as a process in which self (West) and other (non-West) are automatically installed as the frameworks for thinking about the identity and difference between cultures, languages, and religions. Although scholars are now beginning to acknowledge that disciplines such as philosophy of religion and the history of religions emerged precisely as a result of this comparative enterprise, it is less well understood that the conceptual basis for comparative religions was and remains a version of the ontological proof for the existence of God. Given their conceptual similarity as modes of evaluating difference, the ontological proof can be regarded as a central mechanism, as it were, on the one hand, for determining the theological identity or essence of a particular religion, and on the other for comparing religions in their totality through the schema called “world religions” or the history of religions. Closely scrutinized, however, the source of comparativism can be traced to the very points where the identity of God (and by implication the identity of the Sikh subject) is delimited absolutely, which is to say, in terms of transcendence.

How transcendence makes the modern subject

In his 1988 work *The Secularization of Punjabi Literature* (1988), Attar Singh drew very similar conclusions to my argument above, even though his analysis was based on a rather different set of BVS literatures, including novels such as *Baba Naudh Singh* and *Rana Surat Singh*. In these novels BVS weaves quotations from Sikh scriptures and develops a somewhat unique form of Sikh theological mysticism depicting the spiritual voyages of his main characters such as Rani Raj Kaur. It is in the existential and experiential consciousness of these fictional characters that BVS conducts his experiment to bring transcendence into a personal and relatable form. Transcendence touches and infuses an emerging subjectivity.

If the quest for transcendence begins in the social political experience of lack (as I’ve outlined above), this lack is converted into psychological loss and trauma experienced by the central character Rani Raj Kaur. As Attar Singh states, “seen from this perspective the shift in emphasis from the centrality of the divine spirit [theological transcendence] to the psychic state of man becomes pregnant with great significance. We can already hear the rumblings of, as yet nebulous, an individualism which though conceived within a religious framework is inherently capable of breaking loose of it” (69).

However, Attar Singh is also quick to note the manner in which this new subjectivity is forged. The transcendental can translate into the psychic,

that is, it can touch the flesh only through the fires of “Puritanism” which denies body and the sense of the worldly. As I’ve noted elsewhere (Mandair 2005) what is involved here is a certain elevation that Hegel describes so vividly in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* and *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. Materiality of the body, world, and an intrinsic femininity, are “elevated” as the *movement* of transcendence infuses, touches and lifts materiality out of its grossness. In this combined process of touching and elevation the new individual is born. Yet, as Attar Singh further elaborates, this “puritanism comprising abstraction of pure emotion from physical reality is an altogether new element in modern Punjabi poetry as compared with the old poetry of religious sensibility” (70).

Although one can disagree with Attar Singh’s labeling of Sikh scripture as medieval “old poetry of religious sensibility,” the point he is making is essentially correct. The new, modern subject born from transcendental elevation of materiality, does not equate with the kind of psychic formation we find in Sikh scripture (see Mandair 2022). The modern Sikh subject constructed in BVS’s characters is haunted by an “inner need for certitude.... Which can only come from an inner doubt which, characterizing as it does the new temper of an agent violently disturbed out of its mental complacency” (72). In the same way that Descartes and Kant’s emphasis on doubt had made God into a rational idol, so for BVS “the doubts, the questions, the compulsion for reducing God to verifiable rational categories makes of him a subject of intellection” (73). Contrasted with the *bani* of the Sikh gurus which combines the oppositionality of transcendence and immanence into a oneness without opposition (*nirvair*), BVS is poetry, his interpretive process and the nature of time-consciousness underpinning his fictional narratives, configured God “not only as the subject for intellection but also unrelated to the situation of man” (74).

To put this in a different way, the “I” or self as it emerges in BVS’s poetry, fiction, and commentary is tangibly different from the sense of “I” or self as depicted in Sikh scripture. While the former expresses itself only through the logic of non-contradiction (according to which self \neq Other, “I” \neq “not-I”) the latter works according to a different logic: “I” = not-I or self = Other. The social, psychological and political consequences of the two expressions are markedly different. Having said this, I also want to note, that there has been a tendency for some readers to assume that the non-oppositional “I” of *gurbani* and Sikh philosophy being spoken of here, is the same as the “pre-modern” notion of self taught by classical Hinduism, especially its *sanatan* form, or the neo-Vedic orthodoxy of Arya Samajists. This is categorically *not* the case. BVS was right to oppose these neo-Hindu versions which today masquerade as the “I” of Hindutva or Hindu fascism, which he probably sensed was coming. The only question for those of us who read BVS today, with continued admiration mixed with a critical sense, is how to avoid the Scylla of Christian Platonism and the Charybdis of liberal humanism that it spawned.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, J.S. Ahluwalia, *Sovereignty of the Sikh Doctrine: Sikhism in the Perspective of Modern Thought*, Amritsar: Singh Brothers (2006 reprint).
- 2 Though problematical, this distinction is best articulated by W. H. McLeod (1994).
- 3 *Om* was also a focal point with the Indian philosophical traditions, especially in the two main forms of Vedanta (Advaita and Visist-Advaita) and Sankhya-Yoga. In the Vedantic systems, *om* is the *sabdabrahman*, the word or symbol that stands for the supreme being (Brahman) which has two forms, *Nirguna* and *Saguna*. According to the standard accounts, the nondualistic Advaita-Vedanta associated with the ninth-century Saivite ascetic Sankara emphasized the Nirguna over Saguna aspect, with the result that sects and philosophies based on this system tended toward an abstract monism, metaphysical contemplation, or extreme asceticism. In contrast, the qualified nondualism of Visist-Advaita Vedanta associated with the twelfth-century Vaisnavite thinker Ramanuja emphasized the Saguna aspect, resulting either in a defense of polytheism or as a definitive factor in the rise of the *bhakti* movement as rejuvenation of true Hindu religion.
- 4 *Adi Granth* (Trumpp 1989: 940). Translation my own.
- 5 This is what I would call a typical Singh Sabha translation (especially One God Exists). Though it is now often replaced by One Being and so on, still the intended meaning circulates within the same metaphysical form.
- 6 Despite the connotations of the word deconstruction—associated in particular with the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida—this mode of regressive analysis is not intended to undermine tradition but to recall what it was about. Deconstruction here means finding the rule according to which the concepts were formed out of an experience of being, and then tracing backward the motion of their genesis. Deconstruction thus involves a “double reading,” which on the one hand pays close attention to the texts of a particular tradition, but on the other hand, in that very attention, discloses a rupture in these texts which requires a radically different reading of it, thus destabilizing it and in the undecidability, thereby created, opens the possibility of thinking differently.
- 7 I shall refer mainly to noted scholars such as Bhai Vir Singh, Kahan Singh Nabha, Teja Singh, Jodh Singh, and Sahib Singh.
- 8 For Sikh reformists, however, it seems that the actual target of their critiques was not Vedanta as such. There is, for example, no sustained engagement with any Vedantic system. It is rather the influx of Vedantic ideas from Udasi and Nirmala schools throughout the nineteenth century and its effect on the interpretation of Sikh scriptures that appears to have been their real concern. Under the patronage of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, many within the Udasi and Nirmala sects managed to establish themselves as readers of the *Adi Granth* or as attendants of Sikh dharmshalas (P. Singh 2000: 249–250). Notable Udasi scholars such as Anandghan who had trained at centers of Hindu learning such as Kasi wrote influential commentaries on the *Japji*. Despite certain differences with the Udasi sect, Nirmala scholars of the early to mid-nineteenth century such as Kavi Santokh Singh, Pandit Tara Singh Narotam, Giani Gian Singh, and Gulab Singh were equally inclined toward Vedantic interpretations of gurbani maintaining that gurbani was essentially an expression of ancient Vedic teachings in the current vernacular (Taran Singh 1980).
- 9 *par gurmata vich om de mudh eka likhke sidh kita hai ki kartar ik hai.*
- 10 *oh hasti keval ik hai.*
- 11 *eh 1 ‘sankhya’ vachik visheshan karke nahin vartain par ‘sangya’ karke vartaion boi.*

- 12 *jo us de sarup da likhayak us da nam hai.*
- 13 *thit duara updesh karde han man buddhi di paunch to parai hai...us da rup koi nahin, chhin koi nahin. Ki jo nantav vich dekh rahe ho, is vich khoj kardian asi ghat ghat vich us nu dekhia hai. Bhav ih hoia ki oh apni ektav vich sada ik hai.*
- 14 *jad ik hai tan ik hai. Jad nantav vich dekho, tan ghat ghat vich hai, par oh ghat ghat vich hon karke pranchin nahin ho gia. Oh nantav vich bi aap ik da ik hi hai.*
- 15 See footnotes to BVS (1997: 3).
- 16 BVS (1997: 10).
- 17 When we shall begin to meditate upon these perceived qualities, the tendency of consciousness to be dispersed will be reduced, unity will come about, and with attention fixed on the one eternal Being, union will be attained. *Jad asin inhan lakhayak lacchan da, ya gurmantra da jap simran karange tan chit di birti da vikhep ghatega, ekagarta avegi te ik akal purakh vich birti da tikao hoke mel parapat hovaigi* (BVS 1997: 11).
- 18 The word *partit* means belief, faith, or trust (BVS 1997: 27–28).
- 19 BVS (1997: 27–28).
- 20 For details of this argument, see Heidegger (1992: 57–58).
- 21 For example, nothing like the ontological proof for God's existence can be detected in Taran Singh's (1980) analysis of the various streams of Sikh interpretive tradition.

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12 The Manifold Lives of Bhai Vir Singh's *Sundri*

Doris R. Jakobsh

I then tried to find some kind of book – well stored, of course, with moral instruction, and which should improve their [women's] ideas and correct their habits in respect of those affairs which a woman encounters in her daily life, and in which, by reason of their romantic notions, or through ignorance or perversity, so many women are overtaken by disaster and sorrow, and yet which should be in a form sufficiently attractive to prevent their being discouraged or dismayed by its perusal. But though I searched and searched for such a book through a whole library of volumes, not a trace of one could I find. It was then that I formed the design of the present tale.

(Ahmad 2004, 2)¹

Nazir Ahmad's fervent lament from 1869 about the lack of Muslim women's 'proper' literature, specifically their everyday lives, ideas, as well as their moral instruction and correctives was not only answered through the writing of his own didactic tale, *The Bride's Mirror*, but also by others following his footsteps. Bhai Vir Singh was similarly dismayed by the dearth of Sikhism-inspired writings for women. *Sundri*, Vir Singh's first celebrated novella published in 1898 (alternately written as *Sundari*), is the Sikh response to Ahmad's *The Bride's Mirror*. It is claimed that *Sundri* is not only the most read literary work in Punjabi but that it surpasses all other works in terms of its influence on Punjabi society (Bal 2006). Indeed, as of the writing of this chapter, the novella has gone through 49 editions. Moreover, *Sundri* continues to live on in a myriad of ways. She has her own Facebook page, is the subject of a graphic novel – *Sundri. The Birth of a Warrior* (Gill and Sidhu, n.d.) and has been memorialized in a new play.² *Sundri* continues both as a conundrum and as a source of delight in terms of scholarly analysis, papers and conference presentations dedicated to the nearly immortal Bhai Vir Singh. Importantly, as we shall see, *Sundri*, the animated film, continues to uphold and expand her legacy; *Sundri* has withstood the test of time with remarkable tenacity.

For vast numbers of people Sundari has been a real person, an embodiment of faith, chastity and courage. They have loved and admired her. They have shed tears over her trials and they have heaved sighs of relief at her providential escapes. Her name has become a byword in Punjabi homes. Many were inspired by her deeds of chivalry to initiation into the Khalsa.

(Singh H. 1972, 45)

Bhai Vir Singh and his literary creation, Sundri, the latter far greater than the heroine of a novella, continue to be agents and interpreters of the Sikh theology, history and tradition as it is largely understood today (Mandair A. 2005).

It is important to note that Vir Singh conceived of and began writing his first novella while he was still a teenager in high school. Punjab was in a state of ferment with the intermingling of ideas, old and new. The Punjab Vir Singh knew and loved had long been occupied by the British and had lost its sovereignty. This was particularly painful, when at its heyday, Maharajah Ranjit Singh had vastly expanded Punjab's borders and its importance. English language and Western science and learning had overshadowed traditional Sikh education and the Punjabi language, especially within the milieu of the elite of Punjab, most of whom had been educated at Christian missionary or British government schools. An excellent student, Vir Singh was inculcated by the writings of the European Romantics and the values and ideals of the Victorian age.

The Singh Sabha reform movement, initiated only one year before Vir Singh's birth in 1873, was represented by foremost dignitaries and intellectuals. Most importantly, a new and growing urban elite middle class of his time preached, unremittingly, of the urgency of upholding the central tenets of Sikhism in light of real or perceived threats of its demise. The onslaught against Sikhism was multifarious – as perceived by Singh Sabha leaders – stemming from other revivalist groups, including the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and Muslim and Christian proselytizers. Moreover, colonial rule brought with it the unswerving missive that the British were in fact saviours, brought to Punjab to replace all that was crude, corrupt and unenlightened, both culturally and religiously. Thus plagued, Vir Singh, almost a man, recollected the glorious, heroic, chivalrous history of the Sikhs, publishing his novella at the age of 26, clearly influenced by idealistic notions of his storied past. Popular fiction often presents a 'paradox...represent[ing] the corruption of the era as well as the desirability of its modernity', modernity, to be brought about through the colonial project (Ghosh 2001, 951). *Sundri* was written to reform, invigorate and educate. Addressing lapses in pious Sikh living, as well as offering guidance to his readers to be transformed into 'true adherents of their religion' was expressly stated by Vir Singh as his objective in writing *Sundri*. Vir Singh (and, I would add, the voice of his protagonist Sundri) remains an exuberant missionary of a carefully scripted vision of Sikhism.

Sundri played an extraordinarily important role in the construction of religious gender identity during the Singh Sabha period (Jakobsh 2003), of which Vir Singh was the primary spokesperson. Indeed, according to Khushwant Singh, Vir Singh 'was more responsible for its [the Singh Sabha's] achievements than all other members put together' (Singh K. 1984, 67). Women's reform, both religious and cultural, was a central aspect of the Singh Sabha mandate, albeit, a highly particularized, carefully regulated understanding of Sikh women's ideals, roles and identity. Nikky Singh argues that *Sundri* and other heroines of Vir Singh offer Sikh women 'paradigms of moral strength, spirituality, boldness and keen insight for the Sikh psyche' (Singh N-G. 1993, 155). Parvinder Dhariwal takes a different approach, insisting instead that the novella served to *control* women's behaviour. The standards *Sundri* lives by are set by males; 'hence, *Sundri* is doomed to failure'. *Sundri*

has masculine qualities, but cannot use them, as BVS constantly draws attention to the vulnerabilities that are associated with women. This is why time and time again *Sundri* finds herself having to turn to the more capable members of the Khalsa, the men, for assistance. *Sundri's* fellow Khalsa brothers come to her rescue because they believe that she is their sister, and therefore it is their religious duty to help her. Whenever *Sundri* attempts to display an act of courage she faces a predicament that leads to her being trapped in a trying situation. Time and time again, *Sundri* needs the help of her male companions who are "protective" of *Sundri*.

(Dhariwal 2013, 20)

Most importantly, as Dhariwal's innovative analysis of Vir Singh's work highlights, *Sundri* must reject her sexuality, indeed all desire, when she leaves her house and home (*ibid.*). Her role, domestically, is immediately reverted to, but here, in a forest surrounded by her band of 'brothers'.

The narrative of reforming the position of Sikh women was, in fact, a 'façade of reform' (Malhotra 2002, 97) that served to *strengthen* the deeply seated patriarchal mores and attitudes of the educated elite. Indeed, reformers went to great lengths to delineate a place for women within the Khalsa order, given that previously, women's position within the Khalsa brotherhood was not at all clearly defined. Most importantly, they sought to replace the 'hinduized' practices of their womenfolk that had led, in their estimation, to the current, fallen state of their tradition. Only then would Sikhism return it to its glorious, egalitarian state. Christine Fair takes Vir Singh's appeals for women's reform further, insisting that he clearly demonstrates his 'significant contempt for his female contemporaries' through his 'authorial exhortations' (Fair 2010, 119). Much of this perceived degeneration had to do with women's involvement in ritual acts surrounding nature

worship, divination and astrology, and their participation in calendrical festivals and fairs (Oberoi 1994). In the words of Vir Singh:

O Sikh maidens of today...Look at the faith and the plight of your fore-runner Sundri. She never loses her faith...Just look at yourselves and find out for yourself if you are damaging the Sikh community or not! Abandoning your God and Satguru, you worship stones, idols, trees, monasteries and spiritual guides. Being indifferent to Sikh religion, you stray into other religions....

(Singh BV 1988, 26–27, 99–100 – hereafter BVS)

Bhai Vir Singh associates women with the deterioration of Sikhism; Sundri, in essence, becomes the pulpit upon which he is able to guide and especially chastise Sikh women for their degenerate customs and habits.

Women's practices

According to Wikipedia:

Unlike most of the popular religions, Sikhism stresses the equality between men and women and it is even sinful to consider either sex above the other. Singh [BV] reflected this belief in his novels, and featured them in a number of strong female characters...Through Sundari, Singh hoped to embody all the ideals of Guru Nanak's lessons.

(Wikipedia Contributors. 'Vir Singh')

There is, however, a great deal more at stake than Vir Singh's reflection of Guru Nanak's tenets. Though cloaked in the jargon of egalitarian reform, Sikh male honour was at the heart of what has generally been portrayed as Vir Singh's and the Sabhaites' highly emancipatory project for women. During this time of 'multitudinal pulls of multiple identities...men found it possible to stabilize status through regulating women's conduct' (Malhotra 2002, 43–46). While critiquing larger social issues such as polygamy and child marriage and endorsing female education (along Singh Sabha lines), Vir Singh also clearly rejects the ever-encroaching Western influence on Sikh womanhood through his insistence instead to a *return* to conservative Sikh traditions (see also Bal 2006). This included the regulation of women's garb, a central focus of Vir Singh's message.

You have become the butt of ridicule by replacing clean and thick garments with thin and flashy dresses...Remove the confusion from your mind and become pure Sikh women...otherwise you will prove to be, for your husband, the pernicious creeper which dries up the plant and then itself perishes.

(BVS 1988, 26–27, 99–100)

The reason for the interest in women's outward comportment are complex. Women's purity and propriety have long been upheld as a defining factor in why female bodies necessitate male control, but also, and closely aligned, upholding male honour. In patriarchal societies in general, and Punjabi socio-religious mores, women's bodies are vessels of honour. For Vir Singh, women 'have become the butt of ridicule', ridicule having less to do with the women themselves, but more so in the safeguarding of their husband's honour so as not to be 'pernicious creepers'. Strategies concerning 'proper' clothing techniques ensure that gendered formations of identity continuously 're-establish hegemonic codes of honour' (Mooney 2011, 63).

The process of redefining and then reestablishing restrictions on women's behaviour was central to Sikh educational facilities for girls, particularly the famed Sikh Kanya Mahavidyala for its inculcation of modesty, meekness and piety (Singh B.S. 1908). These new educational facilities served as powerful means to regulate and discipline Sikh females, imbibing both 'pseudo-Victorian virtues', particularly the Victorian cult of domesticity, alongside traditional Sikh ideals for women, allowing for 'the bodies and activities of women...to be directed through the 'moral languages' of the male reformers as part of the larger 'civilizing mission' (van der Linden 2004, 152). And, their efforts paid off. By 1917, at the Tenth Sikh Education Conference, women were *prohibited* from coming 'laden in ornaments' and dressed in 'showy' suits (*Khalsa Advocate* 24 March 1917). Increasingly restrictive, 'as the property of others' (van der Linden 2004, 159), regulations were put in place to emphasize newly defined, newly prescribed 'un-Sikh' practices.³

Vir Singh and the feminization of ritual: initiation

One of the great tasks of Bhai Vir Singh and his Singh Sabha brethren was convincing the Sikhs who rejected the Khalsa ideal and identity, of its significance, including Hindu converts. Our heroine Sundri, earlier known as Surasti, stemmed from a family of Hindu Khatris. But because she had heard of the brave deeds of Sikh warriors, Surasti would recite Gurbani to herself (BVS 1988, 9). In the novella, her converted brother Balwant Singh had become the *beau idéal* of the Khalsa Sikh. According to reformers, 'only those individuals who upheld *rahit* injunctions, particularly rules of external appearance and Khalsa initiation, had the right to call themselves Sikhs' (Oberoi 1994, 330). However, while there was uniformity of injunction for Sikh males vis-à-vis initiation practices and external identifiers, the same territory was largely indeterminate for Sikh women. Female initiation into the Khalsa *brotherhood* became a central focus of a newly minted, women-focused Singh Sabha agenda (Jakobsh 2003). However, extending or, in some cases, formulating Sikh women's initiation rituals was no easy task. Early prescriptive orders offered little to the reform endeavour. Of the six extant codes of conduct, it was only the *Prem Sumarag* that clearly

enjoined female initiation (McLeod 2006, 26). Moreover, negative attitudes and rejection of women partaking of the *amrit* ritual (initiation through the double-sword) outside of the inner circle of Singh Sabhaites or marginal groups including the Nihangs (Singh U. 1884, 68) and Namdharis (Kavi 1979, 37; Jakobsh 2003, 113–116; Singh, J. 2014, 273) prevailed. Thus, clearly divergent practices vis-à-vis female initiation ensued (Falcon 1896, 58). According to Macauliffe, ‘ordinarily Sikh women are not baptized. Gobind Singh appears to have been as uncertain regarding the future of women as the prophet of Makka was, and no orders have been left either in writing or tradition for their baptism or initiation’ (Macauliffe 1880, 634).

Bhai Vir Singh’s Surasti/Sundri played an important role in the development of the ritual drama surrounding women’s initiation:

Sham Singh informed the gathering that Surasti had decided to devote his life to the cause of Sikhism and that she – indoor and outside – in times of peace and war – desired to serve the Sikh community. For this reason, the lady should be baptised with *Amrit* and made the Khalsa and she should be considered as a spiritual sister. Then she was baptised according to the ceremony of *Amrit*... The joy of the Khalsa congregation knew no bounds. This was a lucky day when one of their own sisters who had been rescued from the jaws of a lion was ready to devote her life to the cause of Sikhism and would here-after be sharing the hardships and sorrow of her brethren by dedication to their service for the remaining portion of her life.

(BVS 1988, 26)

Only upon her initiation was rescued Sundri equipped to face her future, with purity and piety, to serve her Khalsa brothers. Moreover, her gesture of devotion had the desired effect of mobilizing the entire community to loftier heights of purpose:

O friends of the Sikh religion! Remember this auspicious occasion with devotion and you will for once shed tears of joy! How blessed and blissful were those days!...That was the reason why the community, overcome by the love of the guru was ready to sacrifice itself. It was linked with the Guru through devotion and lived on the sustenance of the Holy Name.

(BVS 1988, 27)

For Vir Singh, it was specifically her initiation that allowed Sundri to be elevated to a ‘holy goddess’, a role model for contemporary women. Indeed, women were exhorted to ‘*save the panth by taking amrit and becoming Singhnis like the fictional Sundri*’ (Fair 2010, 120, *italics mine*) who had rejected her Hindu roots and the ‘degenerate’ customs that came with those roots.

Gendered naming practices

A most intriguing aspect of Sikh history revolves around Sikh naming practices, which have tended to remain very much in line with what McLeod has called 'Tat Khalsa historiography' (McLeod 2007, 130). Nowhere, whether in scholarly or popular literature, is this more evident than with regard to the ritualized history of the name Kaur for Sikhs. Despite a complete lack of concrete textual (or otherwise) evidence, the name Kaur is consistently traced to that inauguration day in 1699, when Guru Gobind Singh is said to have given his followers the names Singh and Kaur (McLeod 1987, 237; Murphy 2012, 56; Singh N-G, 120). However, according to the famed historian J.S. Grewal, there is actually little that is conclusively known about the event:

That a considerable number of the Sikhs used to visit Anandpur at the time of Baisakhi...that *khande ki pahul* [sword baptism] was administered to those who were willing to become the Guru's Khalsa...that a considerable number of people – the *brahmans* and *khatris* in particular – rejected the *pahul*, that the Khalsa were required to wear *keshas* [uncut hair] and arms, that they were required not to smoke, that the appellation of 'Singh' came to be adopted by a large number of the Khalsa – all this is there in the earliest evidence.

(Grewal 1972: 59)

The appellation Kaur for women is not to be found in the earliest sources. Khalsa naming injunctions focused exclusively on Sikh males, namely, Singh. Indeed, the Guru's wives and mother were identified through their single names, or, in the case of Sahib Devan, by a double name that was decidedly not 'Kaur'.

However, Sikh women's naming practices and identity markers came to the fore during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, clearly central to the Singh Sabha agenda. So too with regard to our heroine Sundri. Originally known as Saraswati, or Surasti, a Hindu goddess, our heroine was renamed upon her initiation as Sunder (beautiful) and popularly, Sundri. Clearly, the Goddess could have no place within the worldview the Tat Khalsa was valiantly attempting to contour, particularly in light of Singh Sabha objectives to conclusively establish Sikh distinctiveness from the wider Hindu community.

However, reformers were faced with a conundrum, for, while early injunctions clearly delineated the name 'Singh' for Sikh males, the only formal textual ordinances pertaining to Sikh women's naming practices, as already noted, could be traced to the *Prem Sumarag* which stipulated that females were to be given the name 'Devi' (McLeod 2006, 30–31), though women were also referred to as 'Sikhṇī', or less commonly, as 'Singhṇī'. As I have argued elsewhere (Jakobsh 2003, 2017), given Singh Sabha designs

to clearly differentiate Sikh women from their Hindu counterparts – who were *also* known as ‘Devi’ – the *Prem Sumarag*’s injunction was ignored. Instead, reformers turned to the name ‘Kaur’ that, like ‘Singh’ (lion), stemmed from the Rajputs. ‘Kanwar’ (crown prince) or ‘Kaur/Koer’, its Punjabi equivalent, was most closely associated with females of the Sikh aristocracy of the eighteenth century (Latif 1891, 335; Singh P. 2010, 62). The appellation appears earlier as well, in both the *Adi Granth*, delineating ‘prince’ (AG 417) and the *Dasam Granth* (1988, 1053), the woman Anup Kaur (Rinehart 2011, 121–124). In neither case was there any ritual significance associated with the name Kaur, unlike ‘Singh’, which was stipulated from the inauguration of the Khalsa. The association of Sikh women with the name *Kaur* was by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries at a rudimentary stage and inconsistently endorsed. Many, if not most, were given only one name.

This was to change. And it was Bhai Vir Singh’s Sundri who played a significant role in the ritualized naming shift of the early twentieth century, for, upon her initiation into the Khalsa order in that clearing in the woods, she was renamed not only Sunder but more fully, Sunder Kaur. Nonetheless, even in the novella, there is inconsistency vis-à-vis women’s naming practices. The women who help the wounded Singhs have varied names such as Dharam Kaur, Mai Sada, Beera, Dharmo (BVS 85). Indeed, the process of conclusively associating Sikh women with the name Kaur only came into formal significance with the publication of the *Sikh Reht Maryada* in 1950. The name ‘Kaur’ had finally moved from being ill-defined and even disjunctive, to the level of prescription for Sikh females and fundamental to their very identity, whether initiated into the Khalsa or not. In the *Sikh Reht Maryada* today, the name Kaur is to be given at birth.

Importantly, while Sundri had been renamed as Sunder Kaur, she quickly reverted to her popular name, Sundri, in the following pages. Her brother, Balwant, however, is throughout the novella named Balwant *Singh*, except when he is being referred to by his *adversaries* who address him simply as ‘Balwant’ (BVS 12). Vir Singh and his Singh Sabha contemporaries towed the line with regard to early textual injunctions against the calling of a Sikh by half of *his* name (McLeod 1987, 171, 182). This was clearly not the case for Sikh women. While the name change for Sundri takes on importance at the *time of her initiation* into the Khalsa during Vir Singh’s time, the significance of a gendered Sikh naming ethos remains.

Regulating practice

As noted earlier, Vir Singh included, in the midst of his tale, frequent and somewhat abrupt appeals to his contemporaries for women’s reform, much of which took the form of ridicule. He accused his female contemporaries of languishing in luxury and comfort, while holding, all for naught, to the efficacy of charms, mantras and the wearing of sacred threads, all

decidedly 'un-Sikh' activities and attitudes. Vir Singh, mincing no words, beseeches his contemporaries to remove the

confusion from your mind and become pure Sikh women...The non-Sikhs – both male and female – ridicule your prolonged mourning, but you are so thick-headed that you do not mind their insults and you are losing your Sikh character. Do a little good to yourselves and to your children...otherwise you will prove to be, for your husbands, the pernicious creeper which dries up the plant and then itself perishes.

(BVS 1988, 100)

For Fair, the opprobrium highlights Vir Singh's attitude towards women as 'the root of corruption' (Fair 2010, 120), which in his estimation had come to permeate the whole of the Sikh community. And thus it was that Sundri was (and still is) far more than a 'fictional conception' (Dhariwal 2013, 28). She became the ultimate role model for Sikh women in the creation of a 'religious utopia' (Shason 2009). This utopian vision was to be ushered in through a truly reformed, 'un-hinduized' egalitarian Panth, in line, according to reformers, with the designs of the Sikh gurus. As Sundri in her dying hours proclaims, the Hindu Shastras treated women as Shudras but 'all the Sikh Gurus have praised and commended women. In Guru Granth Sahib, woman has been eulogized and she has been given equal right of worship and recitation of the Holy Name' (BVS 1988, 114). Carefully chosen scriptural passages, as well as Sikh hagiographic and martyrological accounts, as Shason (2009) has argued, all virtually impossible to establish as a historical 'fact', were carefully utilized to design the Sikh utopia constructed by Vir Singh. As we shall see, the utopian construct continues in the latest version of Sundri.

Sundri's third life

Christine Fair has identified the two most important periods of Vir Singh's texts as their 'first' and 'second' lives. The first life is the timeframe within which Vir Singh wrote and published his works. The texts' second life is framed around the 1980s, when they were translated into English and widely distributed throughout the Sikh diaspora by Sikh booksellers. These publications were used to educate and invigorate young Sikhs who were removed from their Punjabi roots. It was the need to redefine the boundaries of Sikh identity, according to Fair, particularly during the context of 'the most intense phase of Khalistan agitation' that was at the heart of the second life of these texts. In fact, they played an important role in the 're-imagining of a transnational Sikh diasporic world' (Fair 2010, 125). In some measure, these novels 'provide narratives that facilitate the imagination of a Sikh world and its inhabitants with the Punjab as its origin' (Ibid., 15).

Given the usefulness of Fair's classification, I propose that pixilated *Sundri* is best understood as the 'third life' of Vir Singh's novella. According to SikhiWiki,

Sundri is a reflection of a new feminine power which absorbs its strength from the teachings of Guru Sahib and Gurbani...It also instilled self-confidence in the women by restoring equality, dignity and respect for them. With 'Sundri', Bhai Vir Singh ji rekindled the latent spirit to awaken the nation from its deep slumber, enthused with new vitality and vigor. *Today, due to a myriad of reasons, the Sikh nation again faces immense challenges in the new world.* It is hoped that the animated movie based on Sundri will help Sikhs to reconnect with their unique and remarkable heritage in the same way as the novel has done for more than 100 years.

(SikhiWiki n.d., Sundri the movie, italics mine)

The commentary from SikhiWiki is highly indicative about general attitudes, especially among diasporic Sikhs, about the challenges faced by Sikhs today. The 1980s were an intense time of Sikh identity formation, particularly when the Indian Army mounted an assault on the spiritual home of Sikhs, the Golden Temple (Harimandir) complex. The assault, code-named 'Operation Blue Star' took place on June 5th 1984 with the Indian army determined to flush out the charismatic and militant Sikh preacher, Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his followers, who had taken sanctuary in and fortified the complex of the Golden Temple. Years of trauma and violence followed. The year 1985 saw the bombing of Air India flight, masterminded by Canadian Sikh militants. Many Sikh Canadians felt that the terrorist actions of a few continued to be unfairly associated with the Sikh community at large (CBC 2007). Sikhs widely experienced the discrimination that came with this truly horrendous event years after the bombing took place.

There have been other instances over the past 25 years, since the 1980s – the timeframe of Sundri's 'second life' awakening – when Sikhs have felt particularly threatened. These have included 9/11, where Muslims and Sikhs, particularly those Sikhs wearing the outward garb of the Khalsa, were the victims of an extreme backlash in the USA and also worldwide (Gohil and Sidhu 2008; Shani 2008). In post-9/11 France, the passage of a law in 2004 to strictly uphold *laïcité* by banning all religious symbols and garb in the public school system was also perceived as a clear attack on Sikh principles and identity (Shani 2011). This imposition was understood by many Sikhs as a 'forced conversion' to secularism and an assault on the Khalsa identity (Jakobsh 2014).

Nonetheless, since the 1980s, Sikhs have also been praised, in the UK, for instance, for being a 'model minority who aren't embroiled in controversies or plagued by extremists' (Hundal 2015) and as models in their economic

and social contributions to society within the USA (Puar and Rai 2004). In India, the highest position in the land was occupied by Manmohan Singh, Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014. In British Columbia, Canada, a Sikh, Ujjal Dosanjh, became the first Indo-Canadian premier of the country. And, in 2018, Jagmeet Singh became the leader of the third-largest political party of Canada. By and large, Sikhs have been able to build on the 'accumulated goodwill' (Bebber 2017, 587) towards Sikhs in diasporic settings. Yet, despite their clear successes, Sikhs continue to perceive themselves as a community perpetually under siege, particularly by the dominant forces that surround them – for they are always a minority – whether in their diasporic locales or in India.

It is from within this context that Sikh perceptions of oppression (and very real instances thereof) as well as being a 'nation under threat' that the need for Sikh heroism and a rejuvenation and celebration of Sikh identity can best be understood. *Sundri*, the animated film, is, like the Vir Singh's novella, instrumental in emphasizing specific values, whether real or idealized, and conveys a perceived need to defend the worldwide Sikh community at all costs. The animation, however, also highlights the practices and Sikh identity markers that were, and for many, continued, to perpetually maintain the 'otherness' of the Sikhs.

The making of animated *Sundri*

Sundri is produced by Vismmad Limited, a Singapore-based animation firm in 2008 composed of Sukhwinder Singh (Director), Navnit Singh and Bakhtavar Singh (Producers). *Sundri* commemorates the 125th anniversary of Bhai Vir Singh's birth and, according to its producers, was created to celebrate Sikh womanhood. International screenings took place from India to the UK, the USA and Canada. The animation has been so successful, and audiences so enthralled, that an informative 'Making of Sundri' documentary has been created and posted on YouTube (Kaur, R. 2008). As narrated in this documentary, 'one of the most difficult aspects of doing animated films is bringing life to the characters, and especially when it is a legendary character, with little, or absolutely no authentic accounts available' (ibid.). The team turned to Anandpur Sahib, the birthplace of the Khalsa, and a centre for the Nihang Sikhs today, to depict the characters and garb of the characters of *Sundri*. Nihangs [literally, 'free from worldly cares'], earlier known as Akalis, were skilled and determined warriors historically, with some remnants of the warrior-lifestyle remaining today. Then, as now, the Nihangs believe themselves to be the elite heart of the Khalsa. They largely uphold celibacy and a particular version of asceticism. However, most mainstream Sikhs either reject the group or, at the very least, its interpretation of 'what constitutes Sikh garb'. Director Sukhwinder Singh notes that the animation and designing team, largely stemming from Hyderabad, Orissa and other places in India, were not necessarily Punjabis or Sikhs

(Kaur, R. 2008). Hence, the team's introduction to Anandpur Sahib and the Nihangs for an 'authentic' version of Sikh warriors and their attire. Indeed, through the film's narrative, but more so, the visual function of animation, new possibilities, new constructions and new directions are brought to the fore. Indeed, for Vir Singh's readers, Sundri came to be visualized as never before.

A new Sundri

As we have seen, for Vir Singh, *Sundri* was as much about the story of the bravery of medieval Sikhs as it was about constructing Sikh identity, particularly, Sikh female identity for his contemporaries. I am suggesting that the newest 'life' of Sundri is similar in that it offers 'capabilities...for signification and meaning-generation' (Eisenstein 1985, 7) for a new generation of Sikhs. Lefevere identifies this process as 'refraction...the adaptation of a work of literature to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work' (Lefevere 1982, 205). As with film adaptation in general, the creators of the animation took a great number of liberties in redefining and reinterpreting Vir Singh's *Sundri*. In terms of the 'meaning-generation' of pixilated Sundri, it becomes quickly evident that the film-makers are intentionally focusing on identity construction vis-à-vis female external markers but here a version of Sikh womanhood that is compelling to twenty-first-century Sikhs. In this adaptation, Sundri's bodily image and comportment is not neutral; it is a 'vehicular medium for the expression of ascribed, a priori patterns and ideas' (Raheja 2014, 223).

One important aspect of Sundri's third life, but similar to Vir Singh's novella, is her outward garb. While breaking with traditional roles for women through Sundri's rejection of marriage and her itinerant lifestyle, Vir Singh was clearly content with his heroine adhering to normative, particularly modest Punjabi dress codes for women. This is perhaps surprising, given that he would have been familiar with a small number of female Nihangs who donned turbans in the nineteenth century as chronicled by Giani Gian Singh (1987, 1151–1153, cited in Madra and Singh 2013, 110). Eleanor Nesbitt too has gathered little-known descriptions, narratives and artistic renderings of Sikhs by Western women from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, including Emily Eden's 1838 watercolour of an Akali woman. The painting depicts 'a mounted Akali-Nihang woman wearing a blue turban comparable in height to her husband's' (Nesbitt forthcoming). Elsewhere, Nesbitt adds: 'Whereas European and north American travellers frequently noted the distinctive appearance of male Sikhs – in particular Akali warriors – they mentioned no distinctively Sikh aspect of women's appearance. Emily Eden's watercolour of the Akali family is the one exception' (Nesbitt 2019, 539). It is important to note that the Nihangs described in the nineteenth century were on the fringes of Sikh society. Various commentators were fascinated by their mysterious, sometimes fearfully exotic

nature. Caldwell describes 'a most singular character, an Akalin the most dangerous looking lady I ever saw' (1843, 304). It is important to remember, however, that 'by no means all Akali-Nihang women of the period, were dressed in masculine clothing and carried weapons: many wore feminine attire and jewellery' (Nesbitt forthcoming, 2023).

For the most part, these extraordinary women have slipped through the cracks of most histories of the Sikhs or of Punjab, whether written by Sikhs or by Western writers of the period. Indeed, heavily armed, 'dangerous looking' Akali woman warriors wearing inordinately high turbans were clearly *not* the women Bhai Vir Singh wished to extoll in his writings. Neither did he bring attention to a small group of turbaned women, devotees of Vir Singh's contemporary, the reformer Teja Singh Bhasaur. Bhasaur, breaking with tradition, insisted that all of his devotees follow his *Khalsa Rahit Prakash* (1911) – a particularized code of conduct for his following known as the Panch Khalsa Diwan (earlier the Bhasaur Singh Sabha) who, whether male or female, were mandated to wear turbans. A 'potent force' within the Singh Sabha, Bhasaur ranked among the 'most vital figures...universally admired for his energy and dedication' (Kahlon 1980, 40). Despite the gender-neutral ethos vis-à-vis Bhasaur's turban-wearing followers, and similarly, the fearsome Akali women that caught the imagination of British writers and artists, these female images did not 'fit' the fictionalized ideal of women in Vir Singh's novella. For these women in their atypical (male) identity markers were largely rejected, representatives of Sikh groups or sects on the margins of an increasingly homogenous, purified Sikh identity imagined by Tat Khalsa reformers (Oberoi 1994; Jakobsh 2003, see especially [chapter 7](#), 'Redefining the Ritual Drama', 210–237). Moreover, Vir Singh, as one of the foremost spokespersons for the 'civilizing mission' (van der Linden 2004, 152) of the Singh Sabha, was inclined towards ideations of civility and rationality vis-à-vis customs and social consciousness as they pertained to Sikh womanhood. Vir Singh was content to stay with a highly idealized, yet traditional representation of Sikh women, at least with regard to their outward garb. Sundri, in his novella, was clearly not turbaned. Indeed, there is not even a whisper of his heroine donning a turban.

In the animation, however, a radical transformation occurs when Surastri is initiated. She emerges from the initiation ritual wearing sombre blue garb, the colour of the Khalsa, but even more startling, a saffron turban. This makeover is most likely due to a number of forces, including Teja Singh Bhasaur's influence coming to the fore in the twenty-first century through groups such as Bhai Randhir Singh's Akhand Kirtani Jatha. Women within the AKJ are also required to don small turbans (*keski*). While this group is seemingly growing in influence today, particularly with its significant online presence, the AKJ generally has remained on the margins of the Sikh mainstream. The main reason for its sidelining is that the AKJ rejects the official Sikh code of conduct, the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*, instead following its own *Rahit Bibek* (McLeod 2005: 167; Jakobsh 2015b).

Sundri's physical transformation in the animation is indeed remarkable, given that in Vir Singh's *Sundri*, her *dupatta* (scarf) is a central feature in the idealized role he has created. It is a measure of her modesty and, most particularly, is used for specifically in the nursing of the wounded. Here is Vir Singh's description of the Moghul youth, found by Sundri and Dharam Kaur:

There was a sword-injury on his shoulder and his body was full of small stabs all over. Blood freely flowed from his wounds. Seeing the terrible condition of the man, this bold daughter of Mata Sahib Devan did not lose her nerve. She tore a piece of her own scarf and removed the blood and cleaned the wound...With great courage, she bandaged the wound with the man's turban.

(BVS 1988, 43)

Head coverings, whether the traditional *phulkari* or *dupatta*, have long defined female Sikh identity (Hitkari 1980; Maskiell 2010). In the novella, the young woman, Surastri, has been transformed from the quintessential, modest Punjabi *kuri* (girl), wearing brightly coloured traditional Punjabi garb, her *dupatta* prominently displayed, but as Sundri, her *kirpan* (dagger) is also by her side. Both *kirpan* and *dupatta* provide her with the tools she needs to serve and protect (BVS 1988, 46). In the film, Sundri is not only carrying a sword; she has donned a turban, quintessentially masculine and 'virile signatures' of Sikh identity (Mandair N. 2005, 40).

Dress and outward comportment in general are non-verbal markers and tools of construction of belief, identity and other fundamental categories (Bradley and Homberger 2015, 317). Clearly, the creators of our *newest* Sundri are not only depicting a marvellously heroic tale; they are also creating a novel ideal of Sikh womanhood. For, despite the valiant attempts by Teja Singh Bhasaur, eventually banished from the Sikh community of his day for his radical views, turbans were and still continue to be the ultimate male symbol; they are unequivocally *not* part of traditional Sikh female identity. While a small number of Sikh women do wear turbans, generally, when diasporic or Indian Sikh women do cover their hair, similar to Sundri, it is with the traditional head scarf known as a *chunni* or *dupatta*. Historically, they may also have worn a *phulkari*, a heavily embroidered shawl. Thus, in the animation, Sundri's turban, a highly visible 'marker' of gender difference, is being utilized to subvert, negotiate and legitimate symbolic boundaries (Crane 2000, 1) in an effort to establish a highly particularized female identity within the newly defined religio-cultural structure of Sikhism in the twenty-first century, at least as imagined by the creators of Sundri.

Importantly, this attempt to legitimize Sikh women-donning-turbans largely stems from diasporic Sikh locales. As I have written elsewhere, in an increasingly complex world, clear understandings of identity, even if

novel manifestations thereof, become central. These include religio-cultural identity markers such as the turban. Identity markers may contribute to a more stable foundation, or, new directions within a world that appears increasingly ungrounded and insecure, giving location within a space of dislocation (Jakobsh 2015a). The animation *Sundri* 'came as a great inspiration and motivator for young Sikh girls facing identity crisis in their schools and occupation. Many believe Sundri having swayed a sea of young Sikh women to wearing *dastar* [turban]...' (Sikhville n.d.). Clearly, e-Sundri has played a significant role in this process of legitimization.

Performing piety

In Vir Singh's novella, daily devotional practices were inculcated into the lives of women, mainly taking the form of readings of particular sections of the Guru Granth Sahib and through acts of service (*seva*) to the roving Khalsa warriors. And, just as Sundri made meditation on the holy word and service to the community the central activity of her daily life (alongside occasional acts of bravery), Vir Singh's readers were encouraged to do likewise. Closely aligned with Vir Singh's penchant for augmenting his narrative about medieval Sundri with sudden bursts of exhortation for his contemporaries, the creators of our pixilated Sundri take similar licence. In the midst of the animation, live scenes of a contemporary all-women's kirtan group, Gurmat Gian – Ludhiana-based musicians connected to the Gurmat Gian Missionary College – are injected into the surrounding forest scenes. While Vir Singh stresses Sundri's pious recitation of gurbani, here, in her third life, her sweet voice of devotion is expanded to include female kīrtanīe. Indeed, these scenes are layered *over* the animation, thus producing 'convincing photorealistic simulacra of events that never occurred' (Stam 2000, 227) fostering 'threshold encounters' (ibid.) between contemporary female kīrtanīe, our heroine Sundri and the contemporary audience. Similar to Bertold Brecht's famous film fragmentizing technique, the 'interrupting of action', this insertion has a jolting effect, for the 'technique of interrupting is active and interventionist...it is the means by which the world is seen as changeable'. These interruptions serve as a means to energize 'the spectator, to stimulate her or him into an awareness of the possibility for change' (Leach 2002, 41). As depicted in this harrowing medieval tale, here, in Sundri's third life adaptation, these inserted female kīrtanīe play a significant role.

Clearly, the creators of animated *Sundri* are of the assumption that there is a need for an augmented place and role for female kīrtanīe today. Importantly, women kīrtanīe are rare within most gurdwaras today and unequivocally not present at the Golden Temple. Controversies have abounded vis-à-vis women performing kirtan at this most holy space for Sikhs (Jakobsh 2006; Kaur K., 2017). However, with new media,

particularly the internet, a novel context has emerged in which the practice of śabad kīrtan for women has

assumed a multi-layered, global, dimension free of censorship. Video-sharing websites (such as YouTube) and new applications for electronic devices are substituting for the role of Radio, TV channels and CDs, giving everyone the possibility to appear in the contemporary context, without any particular agenda.

(Cassio 2014, 260)

In attempting to locate women's contribution to the Sikh musical tradition, Gurbānī sangīt, Francesca Cassio notes that historical and ethnographic work thus far has highlighted women's roles as mothers, wives or sisters of deceased kīrtanīe but certainly not as professional kīrtanīe in their own right. Clearly, at the 'professional level, until recent times, public kīrtans have always been performed by male musicians only'. Domestic performances, however, have been given by women in a 'plain-folk style, accessible to singers who do not receive musical training' (ibid., 234).

In this context, the Gurmat Gian group writ large in the film *Sundri* challenges 'male-biased kirtan politics' (Singh G. 2012) that have restricted women's participation as kīrtanīe. But it is important to remember that it is through 'illusionary motions' (Burstein 2002, 147) that the creators of *Sundri* are furthering their *own* agenda and ideals, offering a complex and layered fictional narrative that reflects less Sundri's historical adventure but instead contemporary Sikh reform values and beliefs. This pixelated Sundri is clearly challenging traditional and gendered conceptions about Sikh women, including female devotional roles and status. For not only is the heroine Sundri a brave, be-turbaned warrior in the fight against the tyrannical Mughal Empire as well as traditional domesticity, Sikh women, by extension, are also freed from the strong societal and religious pressures that have subordinated them. In this version of *Sundri*, they have taken on primary roles as the *carriers* of religious culture – in the form of female kīrtanīe performing acts of devotion and piety.

In Sundri's third life, 'imaginary history' (Murphy 2012, 10) is constructed in full force. In creating this utopian, 'filmic fiction' (Stam 2000, 228), Vir Singh's reform agenda is expanded far beyond his original text through projection and reinterpretation. In doing so, the film adaptation aims for contemporary relevance and reform – as opposed to accuracy – in relaying this latest version of Vir Singh's *Sundri*. Perhaps most importantly – and most likely the basis of her enduring appeal – our heroine Sundri, then as now, transgresses boundaries and enlarges constructs of Sikh women's piety, performance and agency. Sundri offers her twenty-first-century audience novel 'stamps of legitimacy' in light of the fluidity of Sikh women's identity construction.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Bob van der Linden's work (2004) in which he directed me to Nazir Ahmad's novels that were syllabi for women's instruction within the context of Punjab's reformers in the nineteenth century.
- 2 Directed by Dr. Lakha Lahiri, March 5, 2016, the play Sundri was performed at LTG Auditorium, Copernicus Marg, Mandi House, Delhi. See <http://www.bvsss.org/events.html>.
- 3 Kumar and Dagar have shown that with the period of Punjab's militancy in the 1980s, female mobility was severely restricted, girls were married off early and their dress and comportment were closely watched to align them with the codes of conduct prescribed by the Sikh militants (Kumar and Dagar 1995).

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